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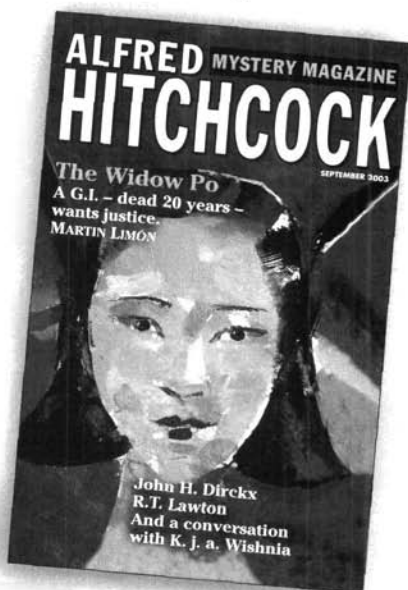
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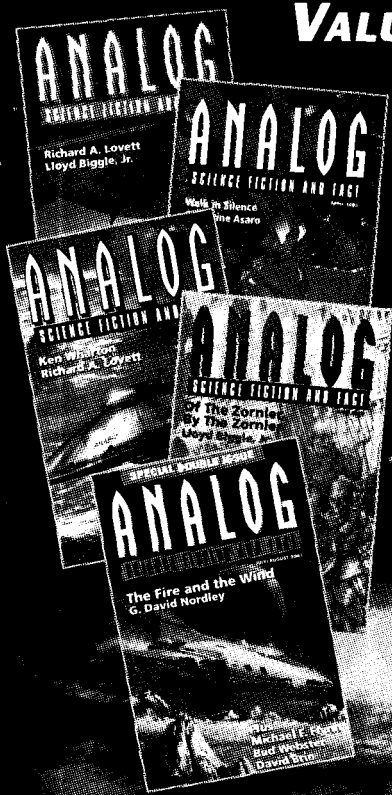
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FICTION



Night burglar
Page 30



Held hostage
Page 74

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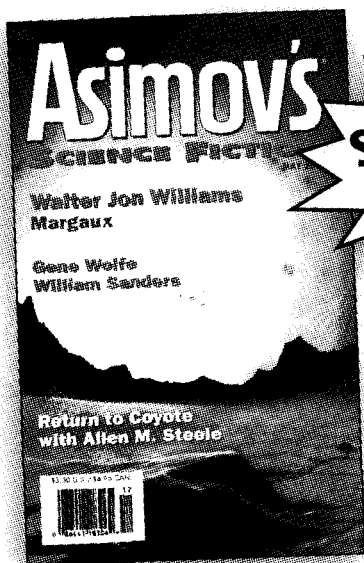
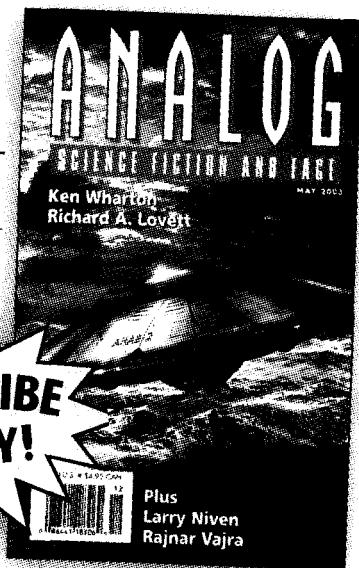
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A GOOD WALK SPOILED

by John A. Miller

Tendrils of fog were blowing across the first tee as I walked into the pro shop at the Pacific Country Club, and the fairway beyond had the look of a green Persian carpet, not a blade of grass out of place.

"Yes, sir, may I help you?" The assistant pro smiled with all the sincerity of a man running for public office, while his tone of voice made it clear that he could tell just by looking at me that I wasn't a club member. Or even the guest of a member. In his early twenties, he was wearing wool slacks with a knife-edged crease, an argyle sweater, and an expression of smug satisfaction that told me he hadn't the faintest idea how grim life was going to be when the members' trophy wives stopped making eyes at him behind their husbands' backs.

"Yes, thank you," I said quietly, making him unconsciously lean forward across the counter to hear my words. It was a neat little trick I'd picked up at Folsom, a way to get a guy off balance without him being aware of it. Of course, there it was used when you wanted to smack a guy, and here all I wanted was to get over a little on a clueless punk who didn't even realize that he was one of

the enlisted swine himself. "I wonder if I could speak to Mr. Amos Martin?"

That did it. A white guy in a cheap suit asking for the caddy master was all it took for the smile to drop off the assistant pro's face like a ball rolling off the edge of a table.

"Amos is working," he snapped, obviously more than a little happy to have the chance to give someone the bum's rush. "I suggest you contact him when he—"

"I understand," I interrupted soothingly. I exhaled in his face as I handed him a business card that falsely identified me as a salesman for the Hartford Insurance Company, giving him a good whiff of the garlic and anchovies from the pizza I'd had for dinner the night before. "I won't take but a minute of his time—I'm just here to drop off his new life-insurance policy."

"Through the rear and downstairs," the young man said, pulling back from my breath and looking at me with utter contempt. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Thanks," I said, smiling as if too stupid to realize that I had been gratuitously disrespected.

Amos Martin's "office" was a dank corner of the golf-bag storage area, lit with a forty-watt bulb and smelling of perspiration, shoe polish, and Brasso. He had a dark, lined face, age-yellowed eyes, and the look of a man whose lifelong dealings with white folks had seldom been what you might call profitable, much less pleasant. I suspected that most of the club's members still thought of him as boy, even if they no longer called him that.

"Mr. Martin, I wonder if I might have a minute of your time."

He looked up from the shaft of the three iron he was re-gripping and in one swift glance took in my ethnicity, off-the-rack mass-market suit, and the twenty-dollar bill in my right hand. The twenty told him I wasn't a cop, and, even more than the cheap suit, the fact that I called him "mister" told him I wasn't a club member. He took the twenty and continued to look at me without saying a word.

"I'm wondering if you can tell me how I might get in touch with Evander Collins," I said, using the same quiet voice I had used upstairs.

"Evander don't work here no more." His voice was a *basso pro-*

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fundo that I could feel almost as well as hear.

"I'm aware of that fact," I acknowledged politely. "I was wondering if you could tell me how I might get in touch with him."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"The only reason I can think of is that the person I'm working for is willing to compensate Mr. Collins generously for any information he might be able to share with me. It could," I shrugged, "in a small way, make up for the fact that he was fired unfairly."

"Evander wasn't fired unfairly," Martin disagreed, shaking his head. "He did something stupid and got his dumb ass fired for it." He paused a beat. "Who you workin' for?"

"A woman by the name of Peabody, Anne Peabody. Her brother, Charles Peabody, was a member here at the club."

Martin nodded. "I remember Mr. Peabody. The police never did arrest nobody for killing him, did they?"

"Not a soul," I confirmed. Charles Peabody's murder had stumped the San Francisco Police Department for more than a year. Convinced from the git-go that Peabody's beautiful young wife (he was sixty-nine at the time of his murder, while she had just turned thirty-one) had arranged the murder, the police had nonetheless failed spectacularly not only to come up with evidence sufficient to indict her but also to come up with one or more viable alternative suspects. Fourteen months later, the SFPD having lapsed into a sullen disinclination to expend more time and resources on the case, Peabody's elderly sister, equally convinced of the young widow Peabody's guilt, had hired me to see if I could somehow succeed where the so-called experts had failed.

"So you lookin' into things for Mr. Peabody's sister, an' you want to talk to Evander about Mr. Peabody's golf clubs." He sat there looking at me silently for several seconds until I realized what was going on and reached into my pocket for another twenty. He took it and immediately turned his attention back to the golf club he had been re-gripping. "Evander can't hardly talk to nobody these days," he said enigmatically, his gnarled hands stripping tape from the club's shaft. "He messed around after he left here and got caught doin' somethin' he shouldn't have." He paused a beat. "Now he's up at Vacaville."

"How much time's he serving?"

"It don't matter." The old caddy looked up briefly and then back down at his work. "'Cause he ain't never comin' out."

I should have known as soon as Amos Martin mentioned Vacaville that Evander Collins was not long for this world. As a guest of the state myself for almost three years, I knew that Vacaville was home to the California Department of Corrections Medical Facility, the place where terminally ill felons from across the state got their debts to society stamped *Paid-in-Full*. Evander, only a day or two

away from death, had graduated from a ward to a small, private cubicle in the prison hospice by the time I visited him. The emphysema that was killing him made it hard for him to talk, but when I explained why I was there he was more than happy to get one more chance to return the widow Peabody's favor before he checked out.

"That woman didn't have to say nothin' about me callin' her," he protested, anger giving him just enough energy to hold up his end of the conversation. "She could have just said no and that would have been the end of it, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Tell me about the golf clubs," I asked, not sure how long we would have.

"They was special," he gasped, scarcely able to breathe despite the steady stream of pure oxygen he was getting. "Mighty special. I caddied out there, off and on, for twenty-five years, almost as long as old Amos Martin, and I never seen nothin' like them clubs. Mr. Peabody's father had 'em made special over in Scotland a long time ago, maybe a hundred years, an' he got 'em when his father died. I heard folks say all the time how they was worth thousands of dollars to a collector."

"So you tried to buy them after he was murdered?"

"That's right. I figured Mrs. Peabody wouldn't know what they was worth, and besides, they said she was goin' to inherit millions. What she need a few more dollars from sellin' those clubs for anyway? So I called her and tol' her I had always caddied for her husband and asked her would she sell me the clubs."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she didn't know where they was, and then she come out wit' sayin' that she guessed somebody had stole them, maybe someone from out at the club, most likely one of the caddies."

"But the police didn't turn anything up," I prompted.

Even with one foot in the grave Evander managed to look disgusted. "They didn't never look," he hissed. "They went an' tol' Mrs. Peabody that she was probably right about one of us stole her husband's golf clubs. They even tol' her that they wouldn't be surprised if it had been *me* that done it. They tol' her to file an insurance claim and forget about gettin' 'em back. Then she went and got the club to fire me for callin' her in the first place." His eyelids flickered and closed. "Twenty-five years I worked there didn't mean nothin' to them people." I had to bend down and put my ear next to his mouth to catch the last of his words. "You know what I'm sayin'?"

I knew exactly what Evander was saying before he slipped into unconsciousness, but the fact of the matter was that the police were probably right in their assessment that in all likelihood the golf clubs had been stolen by one of the caddies. Nor would it have surprised me in the least if, despite his denials, Evander Collins was the thief. Furthermore, I tended to agree with the police that

the theft almost certainly had nothing to do with Charles Peabody's murder. In other words, the theft of the golf clubs was simply a crime of opportunity made possible by the unrelated murder of Charles Peabody.

"But why would Evander Collins have asked Charles's wife to sell the clubs if he had already stolen them?" Anne Peabody asked me when I told her about my trip to Vacaville.

"So he could say that very thing to the police when they questioned him," I responded. *Why would I call her if I already had them?* "I'll grant you it's not the cleverest exculpatory ruse I've ever heard, but petty thieves tend not to be particularly deep thinkers."

Still, despite what I had said to Anne Peabody, something about Evander, probably the fact that he was continuing to deny guilt on his deathbed, told me he was innocent. And, to be honest, other than poking around the issue of the missing golf clubs, there wasn't much else I could do to earn the money the late Charles Peabody's sister was paying me. As an unlicensed investigator (probably in and of itself a felony, although to be honest I hadn't bothered to check it out in the Business and Professions section of the California Civil Code when I took the job), I knew better than to take a chance on trying to contact the grieving young widow—she'd happily drop a dime on me as quickly as she had Evander. I sighed as I thought about the task ahead of me, knowing that Peabody's golf clubs had almost certainly already been sold by the thief, whoever it was, to an anonymous collector of such things in, you pick it, Japan, Scotland, Australia, or wherever. Still, I figured the retainer that Anne Peabody had paid me was good for at least a couple more days of snooping around the Bay Area before tossing in the towel like the SFPD had already done. The odds that I would turn anything up were laughable, but like I said, Ms. Peabody'd already paid me and, despite whatever else I'd done wrong in my life, I like to think I've never cheated anyone. Or almost never.

A San Francisco assistant city attorney who owed me a couple of favors from years ago, back before I was disbarred, made a telephone call to someone she knew in the state insurance commissioner's office and got me a copy of the insurance claim filed by the widow Peabody. (Afraid of what someone might think if I were recognized going into or coming out of her office at City Hall, my friend the assistant city attorney passed it to me at a sandwich shop over in the Tenderloin. It's the little things that never let a con forget that there's no such thing as a "fresh start.") The grieving widow's insurance claim described the stolen golf clubs with great specificity and even included photographs taken in conjunction with an appraisal the decedent had had done some years earlier. I showed the photos to the friend who'd originally put me in touch with Anne Peabody, an old classmate of mine from Stanford,

and told him what I had in mind. He just shook his head sadly and said good luck. Or words to that effect.

Have you got any idea how many public golf courses there are in just the immediate Bay Area? I mean, say, north of San Jose, south of Santa Rosa, west of Livermore, and east of the Pacific Ocean? A lot. A whole lot. I bought a pair of khaki trousers and a golf shirt so I wouldn't look too out of place, and started making the rounds. I knew from my experience with the assistant pro at the Pacific Country Club that it would be next to impossible to get any information out of the private clubs, so I figured I'd hit as many of the public courses as I could in two or three days before telling my employer that anything further would be a waste of her money. Starting with Lincoln Park, Golden Gate Muni, and Harding Park in the city, I hit all the cheesy little pro shops and schmoozed the out-at-elbow driving-range pros with a line about knowing a wealthy Japanese collector who'd put a few bucks in their pocket if they could help him locate a set of clubs made by a particular Scottish maker. And everywhere it was the same: I'd show the photos, they'd shake their heads, and off I'd go. I worked my way south to San Jose and then crossed over to the East Bay, heading north towards Oakland and Berkeley. Finally, at the very end of the second and last day I had allotted to this wild-goose chase, I stumbled onto the golf course at Tilden Park, in Alameda County, above the University of California.

To tell you the truth, despite living in the Bay Area damned near my entire adult life, I hadn't even known it was up there. (Of course, not being a golfer made it a good deal easier to miss such things.) I parked and walked up to the tiny pro shop and, believe it or not, there sat Peabody's golf clubs. I had so convinced myself of the futility of my search that at first I literally thought I was hallucinating when I saw the bag, laid casually on the grass in front of the pro shop, two or three of the clubs out and lying against it. No, I thought, it can't be. Nobody, least of all yours truly, can be that lucky. I turned quickly away, blinked several times, and then casually turned back. This time there was no doubt. After having shown the photos over the past forty-eight hours to literally dozens of golf pros in scruffy little pro shops on both sides of the Bay, believe me when I say that I'd have recognized Peabody's clubs from a football field away. I felt about like that clown up at Sutter's Mill who saw something shiny in the river and started the California Gold Rush in 1849.

I walked into the pro shop and, while trying to look interested in the picked-over merchandise, caught the last of a conversation between a hard-looking young guy, early thirties, I guessed, and the kid behind the counter. The hard-looking guy was setting up a tee time for the next day while simultaneously boring the kid with the mundane details of his last round. He then walked out of the

shop, picked up Peabody's bag and clubs, and strolled casually to the parking lot like a man without a care in the world. I tagged along a discreet distance behind him and wrote down his license-plate number as he drove away.

Back at the pro shop I buttonholed the kid behind the counter. "Say, I couldn't help noticing the golf clubs lying out there on the grass a few minutes ago." I smiled and nodded out to where Peabody's clubs had lain. "What brand were they?"

The kid smiled and shook his head. "You've got a good eye, mister. Those are handmade clubs, almost a hundred years old."

I whistled in appreciation. "No kidding." I paused a beat. "Say, you don't suppose that guy might be interested in selling them, do you? See, I've got a brother who's a golfer, a real fanatic, and he's crazy about old stuff—golf clubs and whatnot—like that."

"Not a chance," the kid said with the certainty of youth. "My boss, the pro here, has tried to buy them a couple of times, but Al—that's the guy's name—Al Martinez, just laughed and told him that they were his lucky clubs."

"Well, maybe I'll ask him anyway," I said, smiling. "You wouldn't happen to know how I could get in touch with him, would you?"

The kid laughed, genuinely amused. "That's the easiest thing in the world. Believe it or not, he's out here every single day of the week. I mean, I don't know what he does for a living, but when it comes to golf it's like the guy's hooked on dope."

I whistled again. "He must be pretty good."

Another laugh. "No way. He takes a couple lessons every week, pounds range balls by the thousand, plays at least one round every day, and he's not even close to breaking a hundred." The kid shook his head. "I'd have given up a long time ago, but hey, that's why they call it golf."

It didn't take a great deal of effort the next day to learn that Al Martinez, prior to joining the vast fraternity of frustrated linksters, had spent the better part of his life in the custody of the State of California, first with the California Youth Authority and then, when he reached the age of majority, with the Department of Corrections. In fact, getting his life story was so easy that you wonder why they don't just publish this stuff in the newspapers and be done with it. The same friend who'd put me in touch with Anne Peabody is a partner with a large law firm in the city, one with close ties to the district attorney's office. A single telephone call by him was all it took to get copies of everything the state had on Martinez, which, not surprisingly, was a great deal. Al had made his living, man and boy, as a muscle guy, most recently handling collection chores for a couple of self-described businessmen who lent money to unfortunate souls at rates far in excess of the state's usury limits. That and whatever else he could do from time

to time to turn a dishonest buck. Not the kind of guy, when you think about it, to have *purchased* a set of stolen golf clubs from a caddy like Evander Collins. In fact, when you think about it, the only time you would expect to see a golf club in the hands of someone like Al Martinez was if he was getting ready to plant the business end of it in someone else's skull. A *real* penalty stroke.

"Say, Al, I wonder if I could talk to you for a second?"

I caught up with him on the neat gravel path leading from Tilden Park's parking lot to the pro shop. A couple of days had passed, but based on what the kid in the shop had told me, I wasn't the least bit worried that he was going to suddenly give up golf. I had used the time to work out a plan and run it by my employer, Anne Peabody. She liked it a lot. When Al Martinez heard his name called out he turned around and looked at me.

"I don't know you, do I?" he asked, his tone carefully neutral. In Al's world, being accosted by strangers seldom led to good things.

"No, you don't, but please—" I gestured toward a wooden bench next to the gravel path—"spare me a minute."

He put his golf bag on the ground and sat down on the very edge of the bench, clearly ready to scramble my brains and make a quick getaway if necessary. "You ain't a cop," he observed. It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"Not even close," I said, smiling. "I work for a woman over in the city, a woman by the name of Anne Peabody."

At the mention of the name Peabody his eyes darted unconsciously toward the golf bag, and then back to me.

"You a private dick?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Just someone Ms. Peabody hired to look into her brother's murder. You know, after the police gave up on the case."

"The police." His tone of voice carried all the scorn of every con that had ever walked the face of the earth. He looked again at the golf bag. "You figured out the missing-golf-club angle, huh?"

I nodded. "I guessed it was worth looking into." There was no need to tell him that what I *wouldn't* have guessed in a million years was that anyone actually involved in Mr. Peabody's murder would have been so stupid as to have kept the clubs for himself.

"It was his wife set the whole thing up," Al said after a second or two of silence. "She was having an affair with some bozo and the old man found out about it. She was afraid he was going to divorce her without a penny."

"How much did she pay you?"

"A hundred big ones." Al smiled at the number. "All cash. Sweet, huh?"

Not sweet enough, I thought, but of course did not say. "What's the story on the golf clubs?"

"I found them in the trunk of his car after I did the old man, and I took them, thinking that after things cooled down a little I could sell them for a few bucks."

Don't you love it? The one thing the widow Peabody hadn't counted on when she set out to hire a murderer was that she would be getting a thief into the bargain. Of course, that's always a problem when amateurs resort to crime—they quickly discover that the Al Martinizes of the world are seldom as one-dimensional as they otherwise might seem. The good news was that the widow Peabody's lack of experience in dealing with bad guys was going to be the very thing that sends her to that little green room at San Quentin where the State of California puts people to sleep forever. People like her.

"But then," Al continues, "I'm sitting around one day watching television and I see a golf tournament. *How hard could it be?* I think. I mean, I look at those guys on the PGA Tour and I could whack any of them as easy as stepping on a bug, right?"

Believe me when I tell you that at least ninety percent of the people currently incarcerated in the State of California would have no trouble whatever making sense out of what Al had just said.

"So the next day I bring old man Peabody's clubs out here and try to hit a few balls." He shook his head ruefully. "Let me tell you, it's hard." He paused a few seconds and then looked at me again. Coldly, as if suddenly remembering why I'm here. "Have you told the cops yet?"

"Not yet," I admit, "but I'm going to."

"So," Al's tongue runs across his lips and I can see a sudden gleam in his eyes, "what's to keep me from hitting you on the head and making a run for it?"

"A couple of things," I tell him calmly. "In the first place, there's only about a hundred people walking around out here, and half of them will see you do it. Everyone here at Tilden Park knows you, so the cops'll show up at your apartment down on San Pablo Avenue—"

"You know where I live?" he interrupted.

"Your life's an open book, Al. As I was saying, you hit me on the head and you'll be busted before you can get home. Shortly thereafter you'll be convicted of murder for hire, a capital crime, and the only choice you'll have left will be whether you want the spike or the gas at the Big Q."

"The Big Q." He laughed. "San Quentin. You sound like a man who's seen the inside of the joint himself."

"Three years at Folsom," I confirmed.

"Folsom, huh? For what?"

"Stupidity."

He laughed and nodded his head. "I heard *that*. Listen." He paused and licked his lips again, a sign of nervousness from a man more used to making others nervous. "I don't suppose you could be

convinced to give a fellow con a break?”

I shook my head. “Can’t do it, Al. What I *can* do, though, is offer you a way out of that little green room at San Quentin.”

“I’m listening.”

“My employer’s primary goal is seeing that her late brother’s widow is punished to the full extent of the law, which, as you know, in this case is the death penalty. In order to incentivize you to assist her in realizing that goal, Anne Peabody will pay a competent criminal attorney to represent you, providing, of course, that you cooperate fully with the district attorney’s office.”

“In other words, I turn myself in, plead guilty, and then testify against Peabody’s wife.”

“Bingo. If you so cooperate, Anne Peabody will use her considerable financial resources to ensure that the district attorney’s recommendation to the judge will be that you receive a sentence of life imprisonment rather than the death penalty.”

Martinez pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “What time is it?”

Whoa, I thought, *talk about your major-league non sequiturs*. I’m offering him a way to save his miserable life and he wants to know the time of day. I looked at my watch. “It’s almost eleven o’clock.”

“I’ve got an eleven-o’clock tee time. From one con to another, how about letting me play a last round before you call the cops?”

I started to smile at the very effrontery of the request, and then chopped it off, remembering who I was talking to. And about what. Still, I reminded myself, Anne Peabody badly wants, and needs, this man’s cooperation. “Tell you what—you make your tee time and I stroll down to the coffee shop by the eighteenth green. I’ll drink a cup of coffee, maybe eat a hot dog, and then I’ll call the cops. By the time they get over here from the city, you’ll have a chance to finish at least the front nine.”

He jumped up and without so much as a thanks headed for the pro shop to sign in for his round. I watched him tee off, a wicked slice deep into the woods bordering the first fairway, and then, as I promised I would, I eased slowly over to the coffee shop and bought a cup of coffee. I took it outside to enjoy the East Bay sunshine and a view of the hills, pleased, but not surprised, that things had gone so well. Anne Peabody had been far more concerned.

“Aren’t you placing yourself in danger, confronting him without the police present?” she had asked after I had outlined my plan.

“Not really,” I had replied. “Believe it or not, crooks expect to get caught most of the time.” I had smiled, seeing her look of incredulity. “Haven’t you ever wondered why so many criminals, *guilty* criminals, actually turn themselves in after the police have identified them publicly as suspects? It’s because, in their heart of hearts, they understand and accept societal notions of crime and

punishment, guilt and incarceration. I'm not saying they *want* to get caught and sent to jail, but they accept the inevitability of it."

"I don't know," she had murmured, still unconvinced, and, bless her heart, worried about my safety. "What about the shootouts with the police we see on television?"

"In the overall scheme of things, violent resistance to arrest is exceedingly rare." I shrugged. "Certainly it happens, but again, the vast majority, even the ones who are carrying weapons when arrested, submit docilely."

"How can you be sure this man, this Al Martinez, will do so? He is, after all," her voice had dropped almost to a whisper, "a cold-blooded murderer."

"I can't be sure, but I take comfort in his actions after he committed the crime. He didn't take the money and flee, he didn't even make an effort to remain off the police radar. To the contrary, he's out at Tilden Park every day, flaunting a unique set of antique golf clubs that qualify as one of the great smoking guns in the history of criminology. Part of his behavior is based on the same misunderstanding that is shared by almost every crook in, or out of, prison."

"What misunderstanding is that?"

"He thinks he's a genius and that all police are idiots. And, certainly, based upon the SFPD's dismal handling of just *this* case, one can appreciate how he and his fellow crooks would have developed such an attitude. Nonetheless, Al Martinez, even though he would certainly laugh at the notion, expects, at some subconscious level, to be caught and punished."

"You certainly make it sound plausible," she had said, showing me to the door of her extraordinary Victorian home in Pacific Heights.

To be honest, despite the confidence I had exuded when talking to Anne Peabody, I had been more than a little nervous when I stepped up behind Al on the gravel path leading to the pro shop. After all, if I had miscalculated, the results almost certainly would not have been pretty. But, in the end, Al Martinez turned out to be nothing more than your garden-variety crook—quite accomplished when it came to roughing up the mostly helpless victims of his employers' loan-sharking business, and, as it turned out, a reasonably competent murderer, at least when the victim was an unsuspecting old man. When confronted with the evidence, however, he hadn't even waited to hear what I had to say. Almost the first words out of his mouth were a confession. *It was his wife set the whole thing up.*

As I carefully sipped my coffee, I watched a foursome walk off the eighteenth green. They were grumbling and cursing about shanked shots and putts that had mysteriously failed to drop. Shaking my head as I walked back into the coffee shop to telephone the SFPD, it occurred to me that Mark Twain got it dead right a hundred or so years ago—*golf is nothing more than a good walk spoiled.* ●

TAKE MY WORD FOR IT AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER

by Robert S. Levinson

They found what remained of the body, really not much more than a gunnysack of bones, on the old, decaying Mabel Normand soundstage—a tall, narrow, triangular building, easy to miss, a block north of Sunset Boulevard where Effie Street collides with Fountain Avenue in the low-rent Silverlake area.

The soundstage was the least important landmark in the neighborhood, surrounded as it was by the outdoor location for Griffith's monumental *Intolerance*—now covered by a supermarket—the Monogram Studios, where Leo Gorcey, Huntz Hall, and the Bowery Boys turned out dozens of cheap movies—now home to a PBS TV station—and the ABC television lot up the street at Prospect and Talmadge, once a picturesque hillside owned by movie star Norma Talmadge, where Rin Tin Tin ran in movie after movie to rescue the three Warner brothers and their Vitaphone Pictures from bankruptcy.

Mabel, in her time the madcap queen of silent comedy, today would probably be entirely forgotten by anybody but the movie historians if it weren't for her love affair with the legendary Mack Sennett and her role as one-third of the love triangle that resulted

A Los Angelean and an art columnist, Robert Levinson knows not only the art world but all the ins and outs of show business. Although this is his first appearance in *EQMM*, he is probably known to many of our readers as the author of the thrillers *The John Lennon Affair* and *Hot Paint*. Those novels feature series characters Neil Gulliver and Stevie Marriner; for *EQMM* he created a non-series tale, full of old-movie nostalgia. **f**

in the still-unsolved murder of that suave playboy director William Desmond Taylor.

She bought the building after her split with Sennett.

Mabel intended to make movies on her own, but too much cheap booze and drugs got in the way and killed her career, as well as Mabel.

Who might be responsible for the bones buried in the gunny-sack?

I already knew that, positively.

I knew that fifty years ago.

Only, I couldn't prove it at the time and I couldn't now, unless forensic sciences nonexistent in the 'fifties confirmed that the victim was who I thought it was.

If it happened to turn out otherwise, I'd be back at the intersection of Nowhere and Still Not Yet, burdened by a pacemaker losing ground by the acre to the passing years and a broken heart glued back together but never completely mended.

The story wasn't through playing out in videotape and words breathlessly spoken by a wide-eyed field reporter on the ten-o'clock news, posing outside the ratty soundstage, whose walls were decorated in Technicolor tagging full of gang signs, sexual bragging, and a gallery of misspelled words in two languages, when I pulled over the phone and auto-dialed.

Harty answered halfway through the first ring.

Not bothering with a greeting, he said, "You think this is it?"

"Harty, how'd you know it was me calling?"

"You're watching the ten-o'clock. I'm watching the ten-o'clock. We always watch the ten-o'clock. I call you or you call me during the ten-o'clock. Hello, who is this? Is this you, Hale? So, okay, you feel better now?"

"It could be it," I said. "You ready for what happens if it's it, you sarcastic SOB?"

"You try to remember where you keep that damned pistol of yours and you come after me."

"Damned right, you still got that right."

"If I was going to forget anything, I'd like to forget you," Harty said.

"I wouldn't give you the opportunity. Take my word for it and you don't have to answer."

The catch phrase that put us over.

You remember?

How Harty would always challenge something I told him and I would shoot back, "Take my word for it and you don't have to answer?"

Like Abbott and Costello with "Who's on first?" Later, Berle call-

ing for "Makeup!" or Buttons telling us, "Strange things are happening." Henny's "Take my wife . . . please!" The guy in the Fox newsreels reporting, "Monkeys is the craziest people."

Of course you remember.

Take my word for it and you don't have to answer.

Harty answered me anyway.

He said, "I don't need your help with anything. I'm quite capable of forgetting you on my own, thank you very much."

And a whole lot more, you bastard, I thought. Take my word for it . . .

We agreed to meet at nine the next morning, but I saw Harty hours before that, in my dream, a nightmare, really. It was the same one I've been having for fifty years, since the whole ugly business—what a *Daily* reporter called "The Hootchy-Kootchy Poochie Caper"—happened. The name has stuck to this day, in a million books, movies, and TV shows; even a smash Broadway musical starring Ray Downe and Roy Durdy as a pair of stage greats modeled after Harty and me, even if the jury in our lawsuit didn't see the connection. When was the last time anyone in show business ever got a jury of his peers? (Take my word for it and you don't have to answer.)

As clear as if it were yesterday, there we are on the set of *Oh You Beautiful Girls*, our first day and still not believing we've made the giant leap from nightclubs to the big screen, and the queen of gossip, Louella O. Parsons, in her column in the *Examiner*, is already calling us "the first serious challenges for the mantle of Martin and Lewis."

In truth, it's more a hop, skip, and jump than a leap, because *Oh You Beautiful Girls* is a low-budget, almost-no-budget programmer, or why else would we be shooting on the run-down Mabel Normand stage and not one of the magnificent stages the size of airport hangars over at Metro or Fox?

The director is no Busby Berkeley, either. Harmon Von Howitzer was in the big time once, but when his phone rang nowadays it was usually a bill collector threatening to cut off his phone or gas and electric, the way the business had already cut off his career.

He got this gig only because his nephew, Bronco Von Howitzer, who'd trained on low-budget-no-budget seven-day wonders produced at Columbia by Sam Katzman and Joni Taps, and some pot-boilers for Brynie Foy, one of the Eddie Foy seven little Foyes, over at Warners, was launching his Bomblast Productions with this sorry excuse for a musical comedy.

The songs, written by multiple Oscar losers Murphy and McCracken, would be performed by raucous Laura Dane, in her first singing and dancing role, newcomer Brenda Lowe in the

Ruby Keeler role, Tree Galleon, plucked from a Vegas chorus line by one of the investors who had an eye for guys, and Barkie, the movies' first and last talking-singing-dancing dog, a St. Bernard with sparkling eyes and an ingratiating smile.

Monogram Pictures had hoped Barkie would do for them what Rinny had done for Warner Bros. and Lassie for Metro in launching a series of Barkie musicals, like *Barkie of Broadway*, *Rock Around the Pound* and its sequel *Meet Me at the Pound*, and *An American Dog in Paris*, which won Barkie the last of his seven PATSYs, before his bark changed and he no longer could whine a tune.

Barkie was on the comeback trail with *Oh You Beautiful Girls*, while Harty and I were providing the comedy part of the "musical comedy" along with Jackie "The Judge" Johnson, a recovering A.A. who knew how to get to the bottom of a gin bottle five minutes before the cap was unscrewed.

Take my word for it and you don't have to answer.

So, it's our first day on the set and Harty and I are mostly in awe just to be here, because we're young—still in our twenties—with our future ahead of us, and everyone has to start somewhere, even with material like:

HALE

That Barkie knows how to carry a tune
as well as he carries a keg of brandy.

HARTY

(applauding)

A-paws, A-paws.

We're both oblivious to the fact that Judge Johnson is stumbling around Harmon Von Howitzer's ear, telling him how we're losing the laughs with our delivery and reactions and how he can make the scenes work much better if Von Howitzer wants to retake the scenes with him.

Laura Dane, meanwhile, has her own unhappiness about us. Laura is busy living up to her reputation for screwing everything that isn't screwed down on a soundstage, and so far, the way we hear it, seems to be losing only with Tree Galleon and us, Tree Galleon because of the aforementioned investor, and us because she sees Hale and Harty as a team and has remarked to the best boy and some others, "I like to save my threesomes for the wrap party."

We're glad for that, for lots of reasons, but mainly a reason that neither of us has foreseen.

On first sight, we've both fallen for Brenda Lowe.

It happens the moment she steps in front of the camera and we

see her from our gawking position behind the boom.

Brenda is a raven-haired, dark-eyed bundle of beauty, charm, and elegance, radiating warmth and innocence as fresh and bright as a sunrise back home in Indiana.

HALE

She took my breath away. She's the girl of my dreams. Believe me when I say I'm going to marry that girl.

HARTY

Not if I marry her first.

HALE

I'm not kidding.

HARTY

Neither am I.

These words spring from our hearts. They're not in the script, although Judge Johnson, who has been tottering near us, at once lurches over to Harmon Von Howitzer and begins whispering in his ear.

Von Howitzer shoos him away and calls something at his A.D.

The A.D. shouts into his megaphone, "Quiet on the set!"

Judge Johnson, frowning at the director's order, has baggy-pantsed like a lost freeway motorist onto the set, a malt shop in Campustown, and appears to be stumbling for a grab at Brenda Lowe.

Barkie, sitting unleashed on a wood and canvas director's chair personalized with his famous paw-print autograph, begins a rumbling hum that turns into a growl, then ferocious barking as he jumps from the chair and charges at Judge Johnson.

Barkie leaps and is on target for the judge's back, in the air as Brenda pushes the judge aside, but instead lands on Brenda, knocking her backward and down onto the hardwood floor. Blinded by the speed and the suddenness, the bite he intended for Judge Johnson instead punctures Brenda's face.

Her scream is muffled inside his drooling mouth, teeth sunk deep and drawing blood onto Brenda's peaches-and-cream complexion, paws destroying her waitress outfit and ripping red streams into her shoulders and bosom.

The set is in instant, total turmoil, everyone yelling and screaming at once, aside from the judge, who is aiming for the nearest hiding place as fast as his straw legs will carry him, and the A.D., who's still demanding, "Quiet on the set!"

Within seconds, Harty and I are in the malt shop and pulling

Barkie off Brenda, trying, anyway. Barkie is still confused. He doesn't want to let go. Brenda's eyes look up at me, pleading and near-lifeless, and she's making sounds like I've never heard before while I'm tugging and kicking at Barkie.

Von Howitzer has the megaphone now and he's shouting at me, "Don't hurt the dog, you moron! Don't hurt Barkie!" The A.D. is at his side, hands cupped at the corners of his mouth, echoing the demand, "Don't hurt the dog, you moron! Don't hurt Barkie!"

Harty has been missing for these moments, but from the corner of my eyes I see he's back, wielding a baseball bat he's found somewhere, getting ready to bring it down on the head of Barkie, when—

It's grabbed from Harty's grip by the dog's trainer, who pitches it away, pushes my partner aside, and sprints onto the set calling, "Barkie, ixnay! Ixnay, Barkie!" The A.D. shouts after him, "Barkie, ixnay! Ixnay, Barkie!"

Barkie opens his jaws and steps sideways from Brenda.

"Good girl," the trainer calls, softening his tone.

"Good—*girl?*" the A.D. says, confused.

"Sit, Barkie. Atta girl. Stay, Barkie. Atta good girl," the trainer coos at her, approaching Barkie with a doggie treat that looks like a slice of fresh liver not quite as raw as Brenda's mauled face.

"*Girl?*" the A.D. wonders inside his palms and looks at Von Howitzer for direction.

Von Howitzer tosses the megaphone at the A.D. and tells him, "Tell everybody to take five."

"Take five, everybody!"

"Make it ten," Von Howitzer decides.

"Take ten, everybody!"

As the crew disappears, Laura Dane wanders out from under someone, wondering in the cigarette-coarsened voice that could only be hers, "Where the hell's everybody goin' in such a hurry?"

She grabs a grip by the arm and starts leading him to wherever she came from—

Leaving Harty and me to watch over Brenda Lowe until the ambulance, a doctor, some help arrives, Harty as much in shock as I am, staring at the demolished beauty we'd both fallen for so hard so few minutes ago.

The donut place was around the corner from the old soundstage. Harty was already there when I arrived, sitting like a king at a window table for two, dunking a chunk of his plain donut in his coffee cup, and making faces at me for being late by ten minutes.

I pretended not to notice, him or his look, and got my own donut, a chocolate-covered, and a flavor-of-the-day coffee before I turned like I was scouting for a table and made like it was a big surprise finding him already there.

"You're late like always, so exactly who do you think you're fooling with that act, Hale, even if you were a good actor to begin with?"

"Whom," I said, settling onto the other seat. I took a nibble of donut, blew on the coffee before trying a sip. "Like you were ever a threat to Marlon Brando?"

Harty stared at me for a minute, then began studying the bottom of his cup like he'd run dry of punch lines and might find another one there.

Finally, he said, "Both of us, we were contenders. We coulda been champs. We coulda been somebodies." Not even looking for a laugh. The expression on his face as pained as it was painful to see. "Except for that damn dog."

"Actually, that damn Jackie 'The Judge' Johnson. Take my word for it and you don't have to answer."

The catch phrase brought an upward tilt to the corners of his mouth, but only for a beat before he locked his lips in gloom again and said, "I was funny, all I ever wanted to be. I could have been big-time moving-pictures funny except for that damn dog. Just like Louella wrote about us—Martin and Lewis."

I nodded agreement and said, "Later, *Laugh-In*—it could have been us instead of Rowan and Martin. Was Hedda Hopper wrote that in the *Times*."

"Was Harrison Carroll in the *Herald*, back from seeing us open for Tony Martin in Vegas."

"Great pair of legs, that wife of his, Cyd Charisse. Tony Martin, not Harrison Carroll. A great, great pair of gams. You remember her with Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*?"

At once, I regretted saying it.

Harty averted his eyes and said, "Remember her? By now you know how hard I try to forget her. I'm sorry I said it to you, about Harrison Carroll. I know better."

"Especially since it was Hedda Hopper," I said, trying to get off the subject.

I knew where it was heading, as usual, and it did after he finished staring out the window at some scavenger birds after crumbs on the parking-lot asphalt. Harty lived with his own ritual nightmare.

It was different from mine.

Harty's nightmare always began with that first vision of Brenda Lowe, but instantly, at once, Brenda was on the ground, screaming, and I'm battling Barkie, and Harty has lost the baseball bat to the trainer, this wimpy Rex Towel guy—"Rex the Wonder Wimp," we were already calling him—and the set's emptying and we're waiting for medics, and—

Harty can't take any more of watching Brenda suffer.

He finds the baseball bat and chases after Barkie.

Rex the Wonder Wimp senses what's on Harty's mind and tries to stop him.

Whack!

So much for Rex the Wonder Wimp.

Harty takes a slice at Barkie, but Barkie dances away from him, turns tail, and races off. Barkie's too fast for my berserk partner, but not so Jackie "The Judge" Johnson.

Harty finds the judge coming out of the john, trying to hide himself inside the emergency bottle of gin he had parked inside one of the overhead flush wells.

He swings and connects hard enough on the judge's arm for the bone crack to fill the soundstage. The judge is too pickled to feel the pain. He reacts with a silent, confused look before his knees fail him and he falls face forward.

Next, Harty goes screaming after Harmon Von Howitzer.

Von Howitzer's outside, stuffing a filter tip into his cigarette holder.

He recognizes the mayhem on Harty's face.

He orders him, "Too much. Take it down a notch."

Looks at his A.D. for confirmation.

"Take it down a notch," the A.D. tells Harty.

Harty swings, dropping the A.D.

"Too fast, slow down the tempo," Von Howitzer says.

He looks down at his A.D., who struggles unsuccessfully to get out the words and gets a dismissive look and gesture as his reward.

Harty steps in, like he's at home plate, takes deadly aim, and is about to let go at Von Howitzer when he's jumped by some crew members, and—

Wakes up screaming, "Watch your backside, you son of a bitch! You never know who's catching up with you!"

Sad truth is, Harty's nightmare is as real as mine.

Von Howitzer is through with Harty.

With us.

Before the night is over, after Brenda's been rushed to the hospital and the cops finish taking statements, and Bronco Von Howitzer has everyone agreeing not to press any charges, because he wants to save the publicity value to a time closer to the movie's release—

Our agent calls me, a bad-news bearer.

Hale and Harty are off the picture.

We've been branded *troublemakers*.

We're being replaced by Moe Yingg and Manny Yangg, a duo fresher than us and working dirty, which we never did, who'd come off the Playboy circuit and had been opening for Barbara Shore at the Rancho Vegas and the Fontainebleau in Miami.

Oh You Beautiful Girls is shutting down until Barkie is over his

trauma and Jackie "The Judge" Johnson's broken bones heal.

I share all this with Harty the next morning, after I get him sprung from a holding cell at Ramparts, where the cops took him to cool off, my partner fighting to get free of them and warning the Day-Glo sky, "Watch your backside, you son of a bitch! You never know who's catching up with you!"

He listens like he doesn't care about anything, except to know how Brenda Lowe is doing at Cedars of Lebanon.

When I finish telling him, he shrugs. I can see that the humor he's always been so full of has left his eyes.

Harty's eyes and our act.

We keep working for as long as we can, although the venues get smaller and smaller and the bucks sometimes not big enough to cover airfare, carfare, motels with two-day-old dirty linen, and three squares.

Until nobody wants us, except for an occasional roast at the Friars, seats end of the dais and opening for kids a third our age, once even for Barkie.

One and the same.

Helped by that "Hootchy-Kootchy Poochie" business, the picture does boffo box-office, finishing in the top ten for the year.

It makes a star of the kid they brought in to replace Brenda Lowe. No voice and two left feet, and whatever else I don't care to speculate. I can't bring myself to mention her name, to this day.

It puts Barkie back on top, and not just with another PATSY.

His next movie, *For Whom the Bark Tolls* for Paramount, is even bigger than *Oh You Beautiful Girls*.

Comes the awards season, there's Barkie pulling them all, including a specially-struck mini-statulette on Academy night, the glorious golden statuette holding a St. Bernard in his arms.

Harty and I kibitzed about nothing in particular for another fifteen or twenty minutes, until I finally said, "We should walk over to the place and see what the cops have to say."

"I suppose," he said.

We took it slow, neither of us anxious to get there.

The loading dock by Bates Street was open and the only way inside, but we couldn't get past the yellow crime-scene tape or any of the close-mouthed cops guarding the place.

As if we were still living the good old days, we traded some more insults on the way back to our cars, and that was it—

Until about a month later.

Harty answered my call halfway through the first ring and, not bothering with a greeting, said, "You heard about the DNA?"

"You're the one with the hearing aid," I said.

"Top of the line," he said. "This little chippie thing so far down

inside my ear I can hear my own itches. The bad news, hard as I try, I never miss a word you say anymore."

"Ignorance is bliss," I said. "I heard, yeah. I always knew, didn't I?"

"Says you. Come on over and I'll tell you what the TV news still doesn't know to tell."

"Listen on your chippie thing for the time. It's late. Better tomorrow, the donut place again."

The truth, after all these years of waiting . . .

I didn't know if I was ready for this.

I wasn't fooling Harty.

"Later than you think," he said. "Tonight. I'll make coffee by the time you get here."

Harty lived about fifteen minutes away, in one of the modest stucco bungalows lining a quiet residential street in Hollywood, below the A&M Studios at Sunset and Highland, what was originally Charlie Chaplin's studio and later Red Skelton's. He had the front door open and was on the porch urging me forward even before I'd covered half the fifty or so yards from my car past a neatly tended lawn and thriving flower gardens that were his passion.

The place smelled musty but otherwise hadn't changed much from the way I remembered it being my last time here, more years ago than I have fingers and toes.

It was like a museum that had put 'fifties living on display. Framed pictures of Brenda Lowe were everywhere—walls, table surfaces, the piano. Over the brick fireplace, a massive oil that captured her beauty and charm before the accident. A warm, sunny smile. Beaming eyes staring after a future bright with promise.

Harty had become something of a recluse after Brenda disappeared. She'd up and left him, cleared out one night never to be heard from again, leaving with nothing but his heart, he said, claiming the same on the missing person's report that made the "Hootchy-Kootchy Poochie Caper" thing bigger than ever.

Other things Harty said, hints he dropped, led me to believe something else, something worse, that he'd killed Brenda in some fit of rage or whatever happens when people find a way to hate each other with a passion equal to the way they love each other.

I knew they'd been arguing regularly, ferociously, in the weeks before Brenda turned up missing.

It was in 1952, and by then they'd been married almost two years.

He had started courting her while she was still in the hospital recovering from Barkie's attack.

She resisted him for months, feeling he was acting out of pity, but Harty eventually convinced her otherwise.

I was Harty's best man.

I still had a thing for Brenda, too.

Not like Harty, but the kind of lingering love that never goes away—

Strong enough to accuse him.

"I tell you what—" Harty said, not with the slightest trace of anger. "You ever can prove it, I want you to get a gun and come after me like you mean it. For keeps."

"I'll get a gun. You bet. Take my word for it and you don't have to answer."

Tonight, on the sofa in front of the fireplace, over a lousy cup of coffee that needed extra sweetener for flavor, he said, "My darling's career was destroyed by the damn dog along with her face, and Brenda never got over it, Hale, you know that part, and how she never worked again.

"That girl who replaced her in *Oh You Beautiful Girls*, she went on to a career big-time. Brenda drowned deeper in her own misery over that. Deeper whenever someone else came along and made it singing and dancing. Got so I hated them, too. Didn't want to know from any of them. Debbie Reynolds. Ann Miller. Cyd Charisse. Mitzi Gaynor. Vera-Ellen. All of them could go to hell for all I cared, seeing what watching their pictures did to my darling." Tears began pouring down his tight, white, translucent face. "Finally, one night, she begs me harder than ever to put her out of her misery. 'Make me as happy in death as you have in life,' she pleads, and I, like a fool, never able to deny my precious Brenda anything else, after arguing and fighting over it for what seemed to become forever . . ."

He looked at me for sympathy and understanding before taking another swallow of coffee and replacing his cup on the coffee table.

"She already had a plan," Harty said. "Next thing, we go to the Mabel Normand soundstage, where her career began and ended. Some outfit's wrapping up a commercial shoot and we slip inside through the loading dock and hide out until everybody's gone.

"She's brought a huge gunnysack with her, the kind we use for cut grass, leaves, and refuse whenever we're outside gardening. We make love a little. We kiss a lot. We cry a lot. Then I put the bag over her. Tight. Suffocation tight. I lock out the air. I hold her close in my arms and keep on kissing her through the bag until I hear a sigh and a whisper that sounds to me like 'I love you, my dear one.' I hear a rattle. I feel her nude body go limp."

Harty needed a few minutes to regain control of his emotions.

Looking at me hungry for understanding and absolution, he said, "I seal her up in the bag good and tight. I find a place to conceal the bag, where I'm certain no one'll ever look and find her, there on the soundstage where she wanted to be, where she could have been someone . . ."

His voice faded inside his throat.

I said, "When she was a contender, like us."

His head moved left and right, over and over, like he was watching a tennis match in slow motion.

"No," Harty said. "We were contenders, but Brenda was always a star. Until the day she died. Still . . . You see how many years it took for the star to be discovered again?"

"I saw."

"Now, this DNA. Really something."

"Something."

We both sat quietly for a few moments.

"So, Hale," he said, forcing a smile. "You brought it like you always said you would?"

I pulled the .22 caliber pistol out of my windbreaker pocket.

Harty's smile broadened.

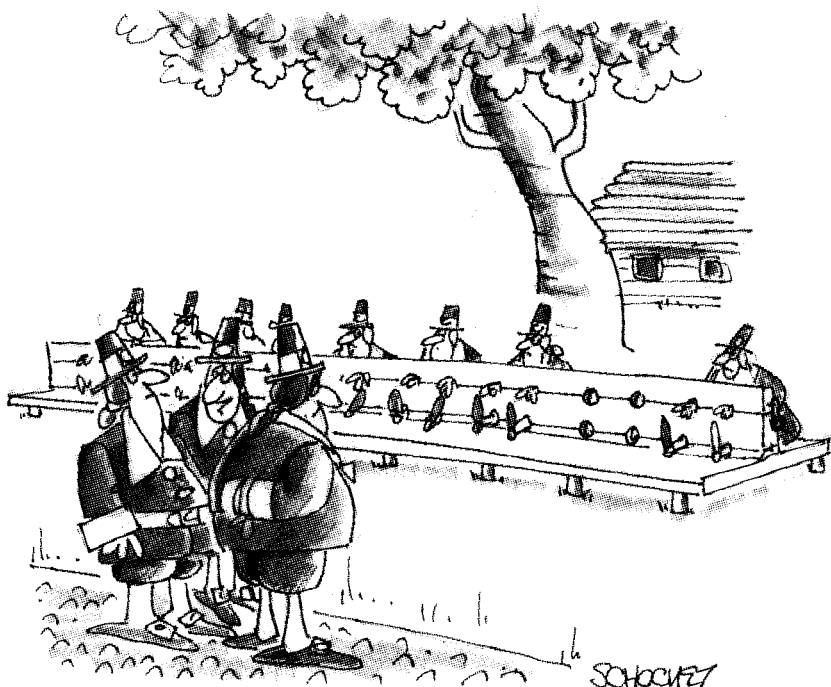
"You know what to do next, like you always swore you would if you found out the truth you suspected?"

I nodded.

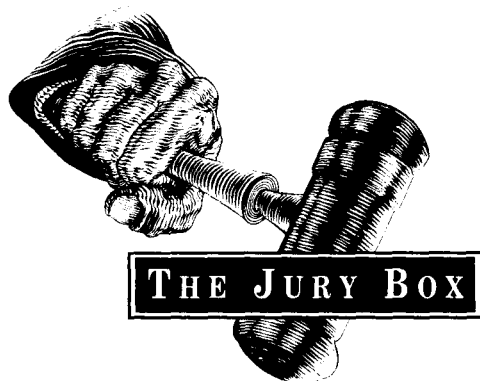
His smile broader yet, like he was watching a miracle unfold.

"Do it, then, partner. Like you always swore. Like I'm ready for now. Aim good and do it. Do it because you love me and because you loved her, too." Harty arched his bushy white eyebrows. "Can you do it, Hale?"

I said, "Take my word for it and you don't have to answer." ●



"You're in luck. We happen to have an opening."



by Jon L. Breen

In an era when baseball pitchers rarely go nine innings, few top racehorses run as many as ten times in a year, directors who make one film per annum are deemed prolific, and newspaper comic-strip artists go on vacation, how many mystery writers produce in such volume they need to use more than one name? Of course, there are reasons other than prodigious output for adopting a pseudonym: to break with the past, to cover multiple collaborators, to separate popular work from scholarly work, to differentiate genre or series within a genre. Below are examples of all of these.

**** Jeremiah Healy: *Cuddy—Plus One*, Crippen & Landru, \$18 trade paper, \$43 signed limited. Healy, whose vivid characters, sharp writing, and intricate plotting make him one of the best practitioners of the contemporary private-eye story, adopted the byline Terry Devane when he added a line of legal thrillers. Of these 14 cases—13

for Boston private eye John Francis Cuddy and one for lawyer/sleuth Mairead O'Clare—four are from *EQMM*, one from *AHMM*, two from other periodicals, the rest from original anthologies.

*** Jane Haddam: *Conspiracy Theory*, St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95. After modest success with a few novels under her birth name, Orania Papazoglou hit a rich vein writing as Haddam. Retired FBI agent Gregor Demarkian, one of the few contemporary examples of the Golden Age-style supersleuth, appears for the nineteenth time in a complex puzzle involving conspiracy theorists, shootings of bluebloods from the Philadelphia Main Line, and the bombing of the Armenian Orthodox church pastored by Father Tibor Kasparian. Among its other virtues, the novel makes a plea for that diminishing value, common sense.

*** Janet Evanovich: *To the Nines*, St. Martin's, \$25.95. Stephanie Plum, the New Jer-

sey bounty hunter whose gross, gritty, and romantic adventures in slapstick have gained her creator bestsellerdom, looks for a vanished Indian alien and becomes the target of the Carnation Killer. Highlights include a side trip to Las Vegas and colleague Lula's search for the perfect diet. Even if you miss a very broad clue, you may guess who did it, but no one reads Evanovich, who can be very, very funny, for her plots. (In an earlier life, she wrote romances as Steffie Hall.)

*** Nora Roberts and J.D. Robb: *Remember When*, Putnam, \$25.95. In a gimmick pioneered by Evan Hunter/Ed McBain, alter egos collaborate. The plot, involving a present-day diamond robbery finally solved in 2059 New York, is serviceable if less complex and surprising than one might hope. I found Roberts's present-day romantic suspense less appealing than Robb's futuristic police procedural, which features Eve Dallas, a strong, well-defined example of the tough female boss cop.

*** Robert J. Randisi: *The Offer*, Five Star, \$25.95. Museum employee Robin Lobianco, stalked by a murderous threesome-loving married couple, is helped by a St. Louis cop married to a stripper. Erotic suspense novels often run to 400 or 500 bloated, over-heated pages—I, for one, prefer this stripped-down version. Randisi, an astonishingly prolific and reliably unpretentious storyteller, has written more Westerns than mysteries,

including some 250 in the Gunsmith Series as J.R. Roberts.

*** Ralph McNerny: *Last Things*, St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95. Novelist Jessica Bernardo's aunt asks veteran detecting cleric Father Dowling to dissuade her from fictionalizing her family, which includes a lapsed priest whose flight from Illinois to California with an equally disillusioned nun was financed by a church credit card. This intelligent novel of religion and academic politics delivers just enough criminous content in the latter stages to justify marketing it to mystery readers. (For his series about nun detective Sister Mary Teresa, the pun-loving McNerny uses the pen name Monica Quill.)

*** Perri O'Shaughnessy: *Presumption of Death*, Delacorte, \$24.95. California attorney Nina Reilly, now living with her private-eye lover in coastal Carmel, defends Willis (Wish) Whitefeather, charged with arson and the murder of his alleged accomplice. The O'Shaughnessys (sisters Pamela and Mary) beautifully manage a large cast of suspects and provide some of the best courtroom combat since Erle Stanley Gardner. Forgivable downsides include some clumsiness working historical research and local color into the dialogue and an unrealistic impulse to provide a happy ending for nearly everybody.

** Caroline Cousins: *Fiddle Dee Death*, John F. Blair, \$14.95. On South Carolina's Indigo Island, a historical society director is

found murdered in an old plantation that is a local tourist attraction. The plot is negligible, but fans of the Southern domestic cozy will find ample humor and charm. Resisters, though, won't be converted. The three amateur sleuths have the same family relationship as the trio behind the pseudonym: Orlando book critic Nancy Pate and cousins Meg Herndon and Gail Greer.

** Marion Chesney: *Snobbery with Violence*, St. Martin's Minotaur, \$22.95. As M.C. Beaton, Chesney writes two long-running cozy series about Hamish McBeth and Agatha Raisin. This new effort lightly depicts murder and social intrigue among the Edwardian upper crust, those same twits P.G. Wodehouse had such fun with. The slang term *tail* for follow, *fun* as an adjective, and *cover-up* as a noun seem anachronistic, and were Gibson girls a British chorus line as well as an American artist's subjects?

** Anne Perry: *No Graves As Yet*, Ballantine, \$25.95. The very prolific author, born Juliet Hulme, introduces a new series, set in 1914 Cambridge with World War I on the horizon. The Reavley brothers, a professor and an intelligence officer, mourn their parents, killed in a car accident that may have been murder: Their father had declared he had a document that would rock the foundations of the empire. The novel begins beautifully and ends reasonably well, but the middle has too much wallowing

in sorrow and not enough plot movement. A sentimental family-saga sensibility and an Edgar Wallace plot make for an awkward mix.

Egyptologist Barbara Mertz, who adopted the names Barbara Michaels and Elizabeth Peters for fiction writing, contributes under all three names to the fascinating coffee-table book *Amelia Peabody's Egypt: A Compendium* (Morrow, \$29.95), edited by Peters and Kristin Whitbread.

Francis M. Nevins and Martin Grams' new edition of *The Sound of Detection* (OTR, \$29.95), considerably expanding the 1983 first edition by Nevins and Ray Stanich, includes among its amazing volume of data on the Ellery Queen radio show details on the role of Anthony Boucher, who took over the plotting job for Fred Dannay and became Manfred Lee's Queenian collaborator for part of the show's run.

All twelve of the Trevis Tarrant stories by C. Daly King (1895-1963), a locked-room specialist and one of the most intriguing of the American Golden Agers, are gathered in *The Complete Curious Mr. Tarrant* (Crippen & Landru, \$29 hardcover, \$19 trade paper), with an introduction by Edward D. Hoch. Even if you have the eight-tale original volume, in its rare 1935 British edition or 1977 American first, and back files of *EQMM* to access three of the stories, you may have missed the twelfth, from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2/51).



MISSING YOU ALREADY

by Neil Schofield

Laurence Pettifer, tucked up in bed one cold winter's night, was having a wonderful dream. It had started in the gallery. He was having a lot of dreams recently about the art gallery, because it was much on his mind. Apparently, there was a private view on, and he was, as usual, circulating among the invitees, who were all drinking wine and nibbling petits fours. The worrying thing was that he wasn't quite certain which artist he was exhibiting this time. The walls were full of framed canvases, but all were blank. Nonetheless, everyone seemed to be ecstatic about them. Then Imogen surged through the crowd, completely nude. She was a large woman, so there was a lot of nudity, but no one seemed to pay the slightest attention. Not unusually, she was shouting at him, shouting about the only one of the canvases with anything on it, a vast landscape, pointing at it and saying, "But it's real, can't you see, you idiot? It's real." He stared at the landscape. "All right," he said to Imogen, "let's see."

There was a large open touring car in the gallery, which wasn't, for some reason, surprising. He got into the car with Imogen and

they started up and drove into the landscape. Then they were rolling along a cliff road on the South Coast, somewhere near Beachy Head, it seemed to him, although he couldn't be sure, and they could see the Eiffel Tower not far away. "You see?" said Imogen. "I told you."

Laurence parked on a grassy slope with a beautiful view of the sea, and got out, pulling the picnic basket from the backseat. As he did so, he realised that he had not put on the hand brake: The car was rolling away down the slope towards the edge of a horrendous void. His wife's white and terrified face was turned

towards him: "Laurence! Laurence, help me, do something!" Laurence waved and called, "Missing you already, Imogen." Her cries became more insistent: "Laurence! Laurence!" And now someone in the crowd, which somehow seemed to have gathered behind him, was shaking his shoulder. He turned round in irritation, or rather he turned *over*, and woke up to find his wife shaking his shoulder, saying, "Laurence! Laurence! Wake up."

He stared at her fuzzily in the half-dark. What was she doing in his room?

"What is it, for God's sake?" he said.

"There's someone downstairs." Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

Laurence let his head fall back on the pillows. Oh for heaven's sake. This was always happening. And she would choose the moment when he was in the middle of a glorious dream.

"Go back to bed, Imogen. There's no one downstairs. You're imagining things. As usual."

"I'm not," she hissed. "I definitely heard a noise downstairs in the dining room. Somebody's going through the silver cupboard. I heard that squeaky door."

Laurence stared at the ceiling and listened. He could hear nothing from downstairs. "You've been having a dream. Go back to bed and let me sleep."

"That's typical of you, Laurence Pettifer. Lying here doing nothing. We could all be murdered in our beds."

"You're not *in* bed," he pointed out reasonably enough. She snorted. Laurence sighed. He could see he was going to get no

A former *EQMM* Readers Award finalist, Neil Schofield has proved a prolific short story writer over the past few years. In addition to the dozen stories he's sold to this magazine, he has credits in *World-Wide Writers*, *AHMM*, and the anthology *Small Crimes*, edited by Michael Bracken (Wildside Press/2003). Mr. Schofield lives in France, but his settings and subjects are almost always British. ¶

peace until he actually did something. He sat up in bed, threw back the bedclothes, and swung his feet to the floor.

"All right, dammit, I'll go and have a look. But it's a waste of time."

"I'm going back to my room and I'm locking myself in," said Imogen Pettifer. He watched her large, dressing-gowned figure tiptoe to the door and vanish. He sat on the edge of his bed. She might at least have offered to come with him or wished him good luck or something. But no. They weren't on those sort of terms anymore. They weren't on any sort of terms. He sighed heavily and got to his feet, took his dressing gown from the bedside chair and put it on.

Then he thought: Suppose, just suppose, there is someone down there? All right, it was hardly likely. Imogen was always hearing things: mice, rats, marauding wild dogs in the garden, escaped lunatics climbing the wall. Once she had invented an entire gang of crooks who were crouched at the bottom of the garden muttering and quarrelling over the division of their loot. *That* turned out to be the tarpaulin covering the unfinished garage flapping and creaking in the wind.

Yes, all right, she was a stupid woman, but suppose this time there was someone down there? It was always possible. Unlikely, given the stoutness of the doors and windows in this place. But then, if someone wants to get in badly enough, they'll get in, won't they?

He really ought to have something with him just in case. He wasn't a large man, and had never been the sporty type, so there were no golf clubs or baseball bats lying handily around, and the notion of overpowering a hulking burglar with the meagre physical means at his disposal was laughable. There were plenty of things in the kitchen, of course, but that was downstairs. Why were the *useful things* always somewhere else?

He went to his wardrobe. At the bottom, hidden away under piles of clothing that he kept meaning to throw out, were a number of shoeboxes. The very bottom one was the one he was after. He pulled it out and opened it. Inside, wrapped in chamois leather, was the revolver.

It wasn't a large gun; he didn't know anything about them and he had no idea what calibre the thing was or even if the calibre was important. He had a vague notion that it was a .32, whatever that meant. Did it mean that it hurt more than a smaller calibre bullet, or that it hurt less than a .45, for instance?

It was his father-in-law, Vernon, who had drawn Laurence into his study one night just after their marriage when he and Imogen were spending the weekend with her parents in Norfolk. Vernon was a large, beefy man, and a nature-lover—or rather he loved

killing it in large quantities. To this end he had amassed an armoury of which the IRA would have been grievously jealous. Shotguns, rifles, revolvers, pistols, and a collection of very, *very* illegal automatic weapons. All that, plus a case of hand grenades which he used for culling the pike in his section of the river. The ammunition for this lot filled one whole cupboard in his study. With fantastic ingenuity, Vernon had managed to smuggle all this into the house without the knowledge of his family and had concealed it all in cunningly constructed cupboards in his study walls. All this only came out years later, when Vernon went barking mad and began conducting a strictly unofficial cull of the tramp population in the Norfolk lanes. This was frowned upon severely by the authorities, and the police and several psychiatrists rolled up in force in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and in body armour. It took three police transit vans to transport everything away from the house. And it took three beefy male nurses to get Vernon into the ambulance.

But this was later, and at the time, when Vernon shiftily edged Laurence into his study, he didn't look barking mad, he simply looked his usual paranoid self.

"Here, Laurence," he said, "take this." And he held out the revolver.

"What's this for, Vernon?" asked Laurence.

"Don't like to think of you and my little girl living in that great place miles from anywhere," Vernon said. "You're a natural target for all the murderous riffraff in the county. Got to have some protection, lad."

"But I wouldn't even know how to use it," protested Laurence, thrusting the thing back at Vernon.

"'S easy. Look." He showed Laurence. And it was easy. "Shoot 'em in the chest, that's my advice; that's the biggest target. Then go over and shoot them in the head."

Laurence had turned the gun over in his hands. It was strange. It was only a lump of metal with a few moving parts, but you actually did feel better-equipped with one of these things.

"It's not big," said Vernon, "it's not a man-stopper. But it'll make 'em lie down for a rest. Unless you'd like something bigger?" he said, his large face filled with eagerness. "I've got a Kalashnikov you can have, if you like. 'Course, that takes a bit of practice. And it does make a bit of a mess of the furnishings."

Laurence hastily refused. But he took the revolver anyway, to keep Vernon happy, and besides, you never knew. He had kept it for years, and had never told Imogen about it. He had especially not told her about it after Vernon's incarceration in the mental hospital, when she realised that she had spent her childhood and

youth in the same house as a madman with the firepower of an infantry platoon.

Now he turned the revolver over in his hand again. Yes, he'd take it downstairs with him. He wasn't going to shoot anyone, assuming that there was somebody down there, but it might frighten them. It certainly frightened *him* and he was the one holding it.

He padded softly out of his room and carefully along to the head of the staircase, listening all the way. There was a little light from the high window on the first landing and he leaned over the solid oak banister, trying to discern any movement down in the hall. There was none, he was sure.

He looked back along the bedroom corridor. Imogen's door was shut, as she had promised. No help there. Oh well.

He went down the first flight of stairs and stopped under the window to listen once more. Perhaps—perhaps, he thought, there was something, nothing identifiable, but a far-off—yes, there it was again, the sound of a drawer being opened. She'd been right. There *was* someone. And the someone was now in the living room at the far end of the hall. He rapidly descended the second flight of stairs, paused on the penultimate stair, and looked along the hall towards the front door. Yes, there we were. The living-room door was ajar. He stared at it and then saw a shadow flit across the opening. The curtains were obviously open and someone had just passed through the moonlight.

He realised that he was panting slightly, and the blood in his ears sounded like a water pump. What was he going to do? The sensible thing would be to ring the police and then go back upstairs until they came, but two thoughts prevented him from taking his own sensible advice. There was a telephone in the living room and one in the lounge on the other side of the hall. There was also one upstairs, of course, but it was behind Imogen's locked door.

And then . . . And then there was the thought of the safe in the living room. Yes, there was the problem. Five years before, he had had the safe installed with precisely this sort of situation in mind, after there had been a spate of robberies in Norfolk. But it had turned out useful in other ways, too, he had found, because there had been occasions when a client or another gallery was willing to pay him in cash and some little arrangement about the invoicing had been possible. Each time, and it had become increasingly often, he had avoided putting all the money through the books, and brought the balance home to keep in the safe. It had built up quite a bit recently, even despite his dipping in to fuel Imogen's spending habits. He thought there must be at least fifteen thousand in there now. He was a little vague about the total, but it was

comfortingly high. For the last couple of years, since their marriage had begun its meltdown, he had started to think of it as his escape fund.

Now the burglar was in the same room as the safe. If he had found it, and if Laurence called the police, there would be Questions Asked. First by the police, then probably by the Inland Revenue, who frowned on citizens who kept large amounts of undeclared cash at home.

And, most worryingly, he would certainly be interrogated by Imogen. That would be the worst, because Imogen would most unreasonably feel that since she had financed the gallery in the first place, he shouldn't be keeping bits of money back for himself. There would be reprisals, that was certain.

No, he decided, he would handle this himself. But he wasn't going along that hall. The frontal approach was an idiot's tactic. To his immediate right was the door to the kitchen, and from the kitchen, there was another door into the living room. That was the thing to do. Outflank the bastard. He gently pushed open the kitchen door and moved swiftly across the room. He pressed his ear against the door to the living room, but could hear nothing. He turned the handle with exquisite care, pulled the door open a fraction, and listened again. He could hear definite sounds of breathing. There was someone there.

He pulled the door open enough to allow his body to enter, and squeezed through. He glanced quickly round. Nothing. Then he saw the man at the other side of the room, standing immobile by the hall door. He was holding something, Laurence couldn't quite see what. What was clear was that despite his care, Laurence must have made a sound somewhere on his way downstairs, and the burglar had heard it. He was waiting at the door, in ambush.

Quite suddenly, Laurence realised that he had stopped panting. His breathing was quite even.

All right, he thought, let's have a look at you. He raised the pistol, levelled it at the burglar, and with his left hand pressed the switch that turned on the two standard lamps which stood on either side of the fireplace.

The effect on the man across the room was electric. Laurence almost felt sorry for him. He could imagine the shock it must have been. If it had been him, he would have jumped a foot in the air, or had a heart attack. This man didn't do any of that. He simply yelped, jerked upright, turned, and dropped what he was holding. Laurence saw that it was one of the heavy sterling-silver candlesticks from the dining room. He watched it roll away towards the sideboard between the two large windows. Then he looked at the burglar. The burglar's eyes were flicking from side to side, presumably, Laurence thought, looking for some escape route. But there

were none. There were the windows to Laurence's right with the sideboard between them, but they were too far away to provide an easy exit. On Laurence's left was the huge fireplace. The two large sofas flanking it were comfortably between him and the burglar.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

Then the burglar said, "You don't want to go doing that. You can give someone heart failure doing that."

Laurence nodded sympathetically. "Are you going to have heart failure? I can call an ambulance."

"Don't bother," said the burglar, "I'm feeling better now. I'd feel even better if you'd stop pointing that at me." He nodded at the revolver. "I don't like those things. Never have."

"I think I'm happy the way I am, thank you," said Laurence. He was amazing himself with his own coolness. Facing an actual burglar with a loaded gun, and coming out with these smooth phrases. "But I think I'd like *you* sitting down," he added.

"Where?" the burglar asked. "You got a lot of chairs in here." That was true. Someone had once told Imogen that people could tell the extent of your riches by the number of chairs you had. Since when she had not ceased to buy things to sit down on.

Laurence pointed at the far sofa which flanked the fireplace, the twin to the sofa he was standing behind.

The burglar hesitated, then shrugged and sat down at one end of the sofa. "You're going to call the law." The way he said it, it wasn't a question.

"Oh, I think so, don't you?"

"Get on with it then." His voice was flat; not resigned, just flat.

"Oh, I'm in no hurry. And neither are you, am I right? Anyway, I could do with a drink, and I'm sure you could, too." He nodded towards the sideboard, where a well-stocked drinks tray stood. "Why don't you get us one from over there. I'll have a large scotch, please."

The burglar was still for a moment as if considering, then got to his feet and went to the sideboard.

Laurence said, "What's your name, by the way? If we're going to have a drink, I think I might as well know."

From the sideboard, the burglar's voice was low and indistinct. "You don't need to know that."

Laurence considered. "All right. I think I'll call you Bill. Burglar Bill. That has a nice ring to it."

The burglar turned from the sideboard with two glasses in his hand.

Laurence took a couple of paces backwards.

"You can put my glass here on the sofa, and then go and sit down again." He didn't want to invite any throwing of glasses of scotch and grappings, not with a loaded gun. He was glad of the

gun now, because for the first time he was really looking at the burglar. He was not hulking, far from it, but he was big, and his movements were horribly quick. Laurence didn't think he'd stand much of a chance. He had big hands, did the burglar, and a strong, competent face with cold grey eyes. He looked like someone who knew what he was about. He looked like a man who wouldn't worry about being violent if it came to it. Laurence wondered if it ever *had* come to it. He wondered . . .

The burglar put a glass of scotch down on the sofa cushion and sat down again with his own drink. Laurence noticed that he was wearing what seemed to be surgeon's gloves stretched almost transparent over those large, capable hands. He also noticed that his glass was rather too full, and was again impressed. Be careful with this one, he thought. He reached over and took his glass.

"You going to sit down?" asked the burglar.

"Yes," said Laurence. "Here." He backed to the wall behind him and found, and sat down in, an upright chair. He sipped his whisky and watched the other man over the rim of his glass.

"Well, this is cosy," said the burglar, who seemed now to have recovered his presence of mind.

"Isn't it?" said Laurence. "So, what were you after, then, Bill?"

"Anything." The burglar shrugged. "Silver, money, jewelry, anything."

"Ah," said Laurence, "well, silver, yes, but the jewelry is all in my wife's room and you'd have had a hell of a struggle getting away with her baubles, I can tell you." He felt the tiniest frisson stir the hairs on the back of his neck.

The burglar shrugged. He seemed to shrug a lot.

"How did you get in?" asked Laurence. The burglar jerked his head towards the left-hand window. Peering slightly from where he was sitting, Laurence could see that a neat circle of glass was missing just above the window lock.

"But we do have an alarm—No," he said as he saw the burglar smile, "I don't suppose that gave you much trouble. Very professional."

"I'm a neat worker," the burglar said.

"Clearly. Although you did make a noise and wake my wife up." There it was again, that little tickle. "As far as money goes, there is a safe—are you a safecracker?"

"Not mostly."

"So, really, you wouldn't have got away with very much. What have you got in your bag? I assume you have a bag? Doesn't every burglar have a bag marked 'swag'? Or so I understood."

The burglar jerked his head. Laurence looked towards the door, and just there, just inside the door, was a large black canvas holdall not marked anything as far as he could tell.

"So," Laurence said, "you found the silver in the dining room. I have to tell you, it's not going to get you a lot."

The burglar drank and said nothing. Laurence considered him.

"My wife's jewelry, on the other hand, if you could get to it, might amount to, say, forty or fifty thousand. What would you get for that? Ten percent?"

"Depends."

"Not very much. The silver, difficult, I'd say, but I'm not an expert. So the total for a night's work might come to, well, let's take a high figure, six thousand?"

"That's not bad."

"Whereas," Laurence was speaking very carefully, because what he was doing now was talking himself through it, assembling a jigsaw puzzle piece by piece in his mind, "whereas in the safe, there is at least fifteen thousand. In cash."

"Good for you."

Laurence was silent for a moment, wondering if he was actually going to say the words that were in his mind. Words that had been in his mind in one form or another for months and months.

"Under certain conditions," he said, "you could leave here with that money in your pocket, and with my wife's jewelry and the silver."

The burglar stopped with his glass halfway to his lips. His eyes were narrowed with suspicion.

"I don't get you. You told me your wife's a light sleeper. You said there'd be a struggle."

"Exactly."

"What?"

"I want you to have a struggle."

"With your wife?"

Laurence nodded. "That's right."

The burglar slowly lowered his glass until it was resting on his knee.

"You want me to knock off your wife," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes. I do."

"Why?"

Laurence thought for a moment. "Let's just say I have my reasons."

"I like to know why I'm doing what I'm doing," said the burglar.

"Well, that's reasonable. It seems to be that time of the morning when confessions are appropriate. I have an art gallery in King's Lynn. I don't know whether you know it."

The burglar shook his head. "I'm not from round here. And I don't go much on art."

Laurence nodded. "It's not everybody's cup of tea. Well, I opened the gallery about ten years ago, just after we were married. And it

was a struggle for a long time, let me tell you. It's quite profitable now; we've had some pretty important exhibitions and we've acquired a reputation."

The burglar stirred. He was getting bored, Laurence could tell. He hurried on.

"But the money has always been my wife's. She financed the gallery and supported it while we went through the difficult years, and she still owns a controlling share. Even though it was I who eventually made it work, sought out new artists, built up the client list, in effect it's mostly hers. And now she's talking about divorce—we haven't been what you might call a couple for some time—and that would be the end for me. She'd get maintenance, she'd undoubtedly force me out of the business. And this house is hers, too. I'd be left with nothing. All that work, all that effort gone for nothing. I've worked for too long to see it all disappear like that."

The burglar nodded. "So you want me to take care of her. You think it's the only way out?"

"It's the only way I can think of," said Laurence, and quite truthfully, because he had been racking his brains for months and had come up with nothing.

Burglar Bill nodded again. "I'm going to have to think about this," he said. "This isn't something you go into with your eyes closed."

"By all means," said Laurence, "but let me remind you we don't have all the time in the world. Perhaps you'd like me to open the safe? Then at least you'd be sure about that part of it."

"Later," said the burglar. "First, tell me how this is supposed to play."

"Play?"

"Yes. How you see it happening. What I'm supposed to do for this fifteen thousand."

"Well," said Laurence, "I'm making it up as I go along, you understand, thinking on my feet, as it were, but what I see happening is you go upstairs with me, I knock on my wife's bedroom door and tell her that there was no one down here, she unlocks the door, and then you go in and—and you—what's the word you people use—ice, dust, waste, blow away—?"

"If I have to say anything," the burglar said, "I say kill. Any preference about how I do it?"

"None at all, as long as you do it thoroughly," Laurence said.

The burglar considered him. "Have you been cooking this up for a long time?"

"No," said Laurence truthfully, "in fact, the idea has only just come to me. All of a piece, just like that."

"And what about you?" said the burglar. "What are you meant to be doing while all that's going on upstairs?"

"Oh," said Laurence, "I'm unconscious down here. I interrupted

you, you forced me to open the safe, which was, in fact, empty. Understandably irritated by this, you knocked me unconscious. I only come round long after you've gone. Then I go groggily upstairs, find my wife, and call the police."

The burglar nodded. "They'll put you through it," he said. "They'll be asking questions until you start tripping yourself up. You'll automatically be the one they like for it."

Laurence shook his head. "What can they trip me up on? I don't know anything. I heard a noise, I came downstairs, and was overpowered by a huge masked man."

The burglar thought for a long time. Then he shook his head. "I don't like it," he said.

"It doesn't strike me," offered Laurence reasonably, "that you've got too many options, Bill. You either do what I'm asking you to do and walk out with the best part of twenty thousand pounds and we never see each other again, or you walk out between two policemen with nothing but the prospect of a long prison sentence and we see each other at the trial."

The burglar seemed to be considering the logic of this. He thought for a long time, sipping his whisky, while Laurence watched him. What was he thinking? Was fifteen thousand enough? Not enough? Laurence really didn't know the going rate for this sort of thing; how could he? But Burglar Bill was considering it very carefully. Inside Laurence a great bubble of laughter was welling up; laughter mixed with fear and a sort of gut-churning excitement.

"All right," said the burglar finally, sitting up straight.

"You'll do it?"

"I want to see this fifteen thousand first."

Laurence nodded. That was reasonable. The great bubble inside him was threatening to explode. *Missing you already, Imogen*, he thought with an internal giggle. Then he quelled all this stupidity to cope with the practicalities of a situation which was still far from sorted out.

"Let's see, how can we do this?"

He thought for a moment. Opening the safe was going to take two hands. On the other hand, what was the harm in letting Bill open it? He could easily change the combination afterwards.

"Come on, where is it? We haven't got all night," Bill said. He was standing up now.

Laurence smiled. "Actually, Bill," he said, "you've walked over it at least twice." He pointed towards the sideboard. "Over there," he said, "just to the left of where the candlestick is lying, there's a panel under the carpet."

The burglar got up and walked over to the spot. He threw back the Persian carpet and knelt.

"You'll see a little ring set into the floor. Just pull it."

The burglar pulled open the parquet panel, under which was the barrel safe. He looked up. "Very neat," he said. "Nice work."

"Thank you," said Laurence. "Now I suppose you'll need the combination—forty left, twenty-six right, thirteen left, thirty-three right."

He could hear the *clunk* of the handle turning from where he was sitting. The burglar eased open the safe door and looked in.

He sat back on his heels. Then he looked across at Laurence and laughed.

"Well, I'll tell you this, you aren't going to get a lot for what's in here," he said. "I don't know anything about you and your wife, but it looks to me as though she's already cleaned you out."

Laurence was immediately on his feet. This was impossible. Imogen had never known the combination of the safe—he was sure she hadn't. But then . . . she was a cunning, devious bitch. He had a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said with cold fear in his heart, and he walked quickly across the room. The burglar stood up and moved aside obligingly to let him see the interior of the safe. Inside—inside nestled the three thick bundles of notes.

A wave of relief swept through him, followed by puzzlement.

"I told you—" he said, and that was all, because he had the most frightful pain on the back of his head. He dropped the gun. He turned and saw the burglar standing there, holding the silver candlestick like a club. He was already starting his second backswing.

"Don't be an idiot," Laurence said faintly, holding out both hands, "it's got to be after we come back down—" and then the burglar hit him again.

When he was sure it was over, the burglar whose name wasn't Bill put down the candlestick and without any real haste pulled the bundles of notes from the safe. He put them into his bag with the candlestick and, after a moment's thought, the revolver. Then he gave the room a quick look, flicked the light switch, and waited a moment by the door until a little of his night vision returned.

He didn't even give a thought to the jewelry upstairs because, at their only meeting, Imogen Pettifer had made it extremely clear that he shouldn't, and a deal was a deal. He always tried to give the customers what they were paying for.

He'd had an unexpected bonus with the cash from the safe, so the jewelry was no great loss and he let himself out without a regret or a backward glance. Anyway, if he was any judge of women, there would be even *more* jewelry up there in a matter of weeks.

Weeks? No. That would be pushing his luck. Just to be on the safe side, he'd give it three months. ●



CORNER BOOTH

by Jill Pritchett

The boy and girl made their way up the muddy road as the sun was setting behind misty blue mountains. To their right the sandstone cliffs of the New River Gorge National Park dropped off sharply. Nine hundred feet below them the New River, believed to be the second oldest river in the world, and one of the few rivers that flow north, could be heard roaring through the narrow gorge. Usually filled with noisy whitewater rafters and climbers working their moves on the cliffs, the gorge was now so quiet that the screech of a red-tailed hawk could be

heard as it circled above. The boy was young and fresh-faced and carried a rolled blanket slung across his back. The girl had a long blond braid pulled back from her face with a pink and blue ribbon. She giggled nervously as the boy unfurled the blanket and placed it on a grassy point of rock that was still damp from the recent rain.

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asked as they settled onto the blanket.

The boy pointed to the setting sun. "Look," he said as he wrapped his arm around her waist. The sun dissolved into brilliant vermilion as it passed behind the mountains, and as twilight settled on the gorge, the fireflies began their dance of love. The young couple relaxed into each other's arms.

"So, do you like guiding the river?" the girl asked as she leaned

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toward the boy. "Uh-huh." The boy smothered his answer in the girl's lips.

As darkness fell in the West Virginia mountains the boy and girl became one undulating naked body. "I've got to pee," the girl announced afterward and began fumbling for her shoes.

"Well, take the flashlight and make sure that you walk that way," he said, pointing behind them. "You don't want to pee right off the cliff."

The girl stood up and pointed the light into the trees. "I won't go far," she promised, and disappeared into the forest. The boy watched as the light bobbed up and down and back and forth, getting smaller and smaller. *That's far enough*, he thought, and the light stopped as if obeying his command. "I thought I heard something." The girl's voice was muffled by the trees and the distant roar of the river.

"Well, pee and get back here," shouted the boy. "Gina!" He stood up and shouted again, and was relieved when he heard her reply.

"Hey, it takes more than two seconds to pee!" Just then the boy heard a twig snap, and his body went rigid. A deer, he thought, and relaxed. Then he saw a flash of light. A powerful punch threw him backward. The boy sat up on his elbows and took an uncomprehending look at the red stain blossoming on his chest. A second flash of light slammed the boy's head into the ground. The shooter walked over to the boy and nudged him with his foot. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he dragged the lifeless body over to the edge of the cliff. With a forceful grunt, the shooter pushed the boy until he rolled out of sight toward the river far below. Satisfied with himself, he turned and looked at the light wavering in the trees just a few hundred feet away. The light quivered, then blinked off. The shooter started running down the hill.

Oh God! the girl thought. As soon as the shooter turned his attention to her, she had fumbled the flashlight off and crashed through the rhododendron. She didn't realize that her naked body, white against the black of the forest, presented a perfect target. The girl turned left, vaguely aware that she would find either the road or the sheer drop off the cliff. She could hear the shooter as he gave chase. Without warning, the girl pitched forward over a bank and realized that she was on the road. She didn't dare turn around to look behind her. The road was rutted and strewn with rocks and she couldn't afford to fall. *The car*, she thought, remembering the boy's jeep parked at the road's entrance.

The shooter was gaining on the girl and deliberately slowed his pace. *This is more like it*, he thought. He loved a good hunt. He jogged down the old mountain road, keeping the girl's pale body in view. He saw her toss the flashlight and made a mental note to go back later to look for it and retrieve the blanket. It wouldn't do to

have anything lying around after this night. The shooter knew that the girl would have to turn back toward him when the road made a switchback. He scrambled down the embankment that would intersect with the girl's path. His large black form hidden in the trees, he heard the girl crashing through the brush near the switchback. *Damn*, he thought, *the bitch is heading straight for the main road.*

The girl could see the outline of the white jeep below her and, ignoring the turn in the road, she began sliding down the muddy bank. For a second she thought she would make it. Keys! The girl slammed into the jeep and began wrestling with the door handle. Locked! She ran to the driver's side of the jeep, pulled open the door, and dove inside. As she locked the door, she could see the hulking figure running to the jeep. *Oh God*, she thought, *keys—keys!* In the half-light she ran her hands along the steering column searching for the ignition switch. But when she found it, there were no dangling keys. A shadow moved in front of the window, turning half-light into darkness. The girl turned to see the shooter's large head leering at her.

"Come on out, girlie," he said. "I ain't gonna hurt ya."

The girl shoved her hand under the floor mat and pulled out a rabbit's foot key chain. She managed to try one key in the ignition but then dropped them on the floor. When the shooter saw what she was doing, his lopsided grin turned into a scowl.

"Whoa, girlie, you ain't goin' nowhere." He began banging on the window glass with the butt of his rifle. The girl lowered her head to look for the keys just as the rifle butt pierced the glass. Thousands of hairline cracks formed on the window. She looked up and saw the window collapse around the shooter's hand as his fist punched through the shattered glass. With one motion he grabbed the girl's long blond braid and pulled her face up to his. "I told ya, girlie . . . you ain't goin' nowhere."

Bonnie Frank sat hidden in the shadows of the corner booth at the Route 19 Bar and Grill, dubbed "Smiley's" by the river crowd. At the bar a myriad of river rats and rock climbers drank beer, played darts, and bragged about their latest adventures in the gorge. Bonnie didn't bother to listen—she had heard it all before. It was pleasant, as pleasant as it could get in the Route 19 Bar and Grill, to be hidden in the shadowed corner nursing her beer and ignoring the staccato conversations and occasional outbursts of laughter coming from the floor. From her booth she could observe without being observed, and that suited Bonnie just fine. The men, suntanned muscles gleaming in the dim lighting, outnumbered the women five to one, the normal ratio for most edge sports. The smoky bar was large enough for them to divide up into

two groups—the raft guides at the dartboard, and the rock climbers at the bar, separated only by a few feet but mentally miles apart. Such braggarts, thought Bonnie. Who are they trying to impress except each other? Bonnie smiled as Dwight took up his position at the dartboard. Years ago, when Bonnie had decided to work as a raft guide, Dwight had arrived for guide training in a vintage Porsche, sporting a complete ensemble of river gear fresh off the store's shelves. The other trainees looked like plump little bumblebees in their company-supplied orange-and-black life jackets. Bonnie was another exception with her worn hand-me-downs. Instead of feeling out of place, however, Dwight seemed to assume that he was better than the rest of the hopefuls. At least, that's how Bonnie saw it. She remembered the first time they had soloed during raft training. It was the day she had met Kelly . . . and skunked Dwight.

She could remember all the details: the high, muddy river, Dwight's squeaky-clean confidence, the anxiety she felt about going down the river without an instructor on board, herself in charge of one raft, Dwight the other. There had been only a few guide positions open that season, and when she met her assigned crew Bonnie didn't think they had a chance of beating Dwight's team. Kelly was small, and her brothers were so . . . young. The four of them were dwarfed by Dwight's crew in both size and strength, but when Kelly told Bonnie that she had worked on the Colorado a daring plan surfaced. If Dwight's boat flipped—it was their only chance. When they entered Greyhound Rapid, a recirculating hydraulic that could stop a Greyhound bus, Bonnie and Kelly chose to take the suicide route. Paddling furiously, they barely made it across the drop and a large back-rolling wave. A twinge of delight tickled Bonnie as she remembered the thrill of making it across Greyhound. Then she had seen Dwight, following their example, take the centerline, too, and drop straight into the hydraulic. Bonnie looked just in time to see the bottom of the raft and small, bobbing helmets appear and disappear as the men were circulated repeatedly and ejected downriver. It took all their strength to paddle and pick up Dwight and his men. When they reached the shoreline everyone was physically spent and, for a long while, all they could do was breathe. Dwight had summed it all up with a simple "Thanks." In spite of the sweet taste of that victory and the ego massage she had enjoyed thereafter, Bonnie still avoided being friends with Dwight.

Dapper as always, she thought this night as she examined his clean cotton T-shirt, the required Patagonia baggy shorts, polished off with Teva-sandaled feet. Compared to the other raft guides in their wrinkled and dirty clothes, Dwight looked as if he had just stepped out of a catalogue. Hidden in her corner booth she could

observe Dwight and the others like a spy. Just last year she would have been right up there with either group. Not as a hanger-on, as so many of the bar women were, but as a river guide for the money and a rock climber for the pleasure. That seemed like centuries ago. She drained the last drop of beer from her glass. Born a mountain girl, she had returned after college and a short, sour taste of city life when she had inherited her grandparents' small farm near the Gorge. Now she was a respectable working woman. With her empty glass she toasted her new career as a reporter for the *Beckley News*. No more job-hopping to keep the scalawags from getting her property. She sat the glass down hard enough for the barmaid to take notice.

"Can I get ya another one?" The waitress loomed above Bonnie, a dark silhouette with teased hair that formed a halo around her head. "We got plenty more where that came from, honey," she said, pushing for an answer. Bonnie just pointed to her empty glass and nodded. She was straining now to eavesdrop on Dwight. He was leaning against the bar in an intense conversation with another raft guide that Bonnie didn't recognize. Dwight's voice would rise and fall, punctuated by his finger jabbing holes in the smoky air. When he mentioned the name of Jake McCoy, his voice would rise just enough that the people around him could hear. Bonnie shrank back even farther in the booth listening to Dwight's soft voice with its West Virginia drawl.

"So I said to Jake . . . 'Jake McCoy, you're goin' to have a run-in with the law someday.'"

"It'll be some murderous husband," contributed the barmaid who, because of her important position as the purveyor of alcohol, felt as if every conversation in the bar included her. Dwight lowered his voice. "Where Jake gets his money is a puzzle lots of people would like to solve."

"There's lots of ideas about it floatin' around," offered the river guide, who chuckled at his own pun.

Bonnie tried to hang on to the conversation, but her mind kept going back to the barmaid's remark about the murderous husband. Over the years, Bonnie and Jake had developed a relationship—at least, to Bonnie it was a relationship. They weren't saying the "M" word or anything like that, but they had certainly progressed to the point of exclusive dating.

"Around here people either work in the mines or they inherit their wealth," Dwight simplified. He was one of the latter. "Jake ain't done either one."

Bonnie knew that Dwight had money, and that he liked people with money. And now he was talking about Jake and money. Bonnie began to focus on the conversation. Jake and money always led to interesting speculation. Jake had moved to the New River

Gorge ten years ago when he inherited his uncle's property, which included a house, fifty acres, and an abandoned coal mine that had enriched many a McCoy, but not Jake McCoy. Yet he always seemed to have plenty of money and no real job to merit it. Oh, he had worked the usual jobs as a river guide, and a stint leading fresh-faced teens on climbing trips up the numerous rock crags that lined the Gorge. Neither could be considered a lucrative career. Bonnie had wondered many times where he got the money he so lavishly spent on her, but after dinner and wine and sitting in front of the old fireplace in his house, she usually didn't care anymore. She preferred not to know, because to think of it made her feel queer inside and a little guilty, though she wasn't sure why. Now Dwight's conversation had brought the subject up, and in a way that she couldn't ignore. Dwight's voice was drowned out by Willie Nelson wailing from the corner jukebox, so Bonnie turned her thoughts to the river once more. She had met Jake that same eventful day after rescuing Dwight and his brawny crew. Bonnie had pulled into the nearest eddy and they all watched a kayak slip effortlessly in and out of the waves and slide right past Greyhound. Bonnie was mesmerized by the kayak's graceful dance and longed to be in the little red boat riding the river like you ride a horse. Then Jake plunged his kayak into the eddy and flashed her his famous smile. "Hi there, lonesome, I'm Jake McCoy!" Bonnie smiled remembering his brash introduction. His flashing smile had caught her off guard, and she could only mumble something about not being lonely. He had called her "sweet-cheeks," sliced his boat across the eddy line, and disappeared downriver, his paddles rising and dipping like a windmill.

Another song followed—Garth Brooks—and Bonnie turned her attention to the window beside her. She could hear the crunch of the gravel as tires pulled into parking spots in front of Smiley's. Sunlight filtered through the blinds, making a striped pattern across her table, and then disappeared into a gloom of dark and sinister clouds. Within minutes, the clouds opened to deliver a torrent of rain on the people straggling, now running, into the bar. Bonnie noticed another car, a black Mercedes shiny in the rain, and a couple huddled under a trenchcoat raced for the door. Bonnie was studying the Mercedes when the couple entered the bar, and she was not surprised to see Jake McCoy peering out from the coat. But when she saw the brunette beauty on his arm, Bonnie's heart plummeted and she sank further into the dim corner of her booth. Jake ordered drinks as the brunette sat down. Dwight crossed the small space to greet Jake with a slap on the back. After a few initial words together, Jake led Dwight to the opposite corner to talk, leaving the brunette seated at the bar for Bonnie to stare at. She was very pretty, with long hair tucked casually

behind one ear. She was tall, much taller than Bonnie's small frame, and she draped herself comfortably on the barstool, crossing her willowy legs and adjusting the split in her skirt. Well, thought Bonnie, choking back tears, she's certainly no river rat. The brunette reached into a miniature beaded purse, pulled out a silver cigarette case, and lit a long, thin cigarette. The smoke rose in the lights over the bar, making a wispy line of blue-white tethering her to the white, smoky ceiling.

"Caroline," Jake called as he motioned for her to join them. Well, now she knew her name. When Caroline seated herself in the far corner with Jake and Dwight, Bonnie saw her chance to escape unnoticed. Leaving a tip on the table, she pulled on her hooded anorak and walked out into the rain. She ran to her old blue Karman Ghia with the traditional dented nose, but was soaked to the bone by the time she made it into the driver's seat. Bonnie looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her hair was plastered to her head and tiny rivulets of water rolled down her face. Damn!

When she looked back at the bar, she saw Dwight watching her from the window. It was all she could do to keep from crying. She jammed her keys into the ignition, and the car jumped forward and stalled. Bonnie couldn't avoid looking again, to see Dwight's teeth flashing white in a wide grin. Pushing the stick into reverse, she kept her foot on the clutch as the old car whined into action. As she backed out she saw Dwight make a Model T cranking motion with his arm.

Turning left on Route 19, Bonnie headed across the New River Bridge, the longest steel-arch span in the world and, at a thousand feet above the New River, the highest east of the Mississippi. On the third Saturday in October, skydivers descended on the area to jump off the bridge. It was the biggest BASE site in the world. Bridge Day was the only day BASE jumping was legal, although Bonnie knew people who had risked clashing with park rangers to jump off the bridge at other times. Almost all of them jumped at night, and most of them got caught. Bonnie recalled when Dwight had bragged to the assembled faithful at Smiley's that he was going to do it, but he never did. She turned past the Visitors' Center, following the narrow, winding road that led down to the river and the climbing crags. A sharp left turn and she was on the ribbon of road that led to Endless Wall, a four-and-a-half-mile stretch of West Virginia sandstone that attracted climbers from around the globe. Without thinking, she made another turn onto the gravel road that led to Jake's house. *It's just habit*, she thought by way of an excuse, but she didn't turn around when she reached the top of the road. Instead she backed the little car into the trees and out of sight. Although the rain had stopped and the setting

sun was peeping through the clouds, the forest surrounding the old McCoy home gave the setting a dark and eerie feel, and the house, constructed of log and stone, was dark as well. Bonnie skirted the house and walked through dripping trees to a point of rock that looked out over the Gorge. Sitting on the damp boulders, she stared at the house, allowing tears to flow. Oh, Jake, you're such a rat! She wondered how she had ever become so infatuated with him. But she knew how. It was seared into her mind as if it were yesterday.

The night after Jake had made his smiling introduction on the river she had recognized him at Smiley's. He was throwing darts with a girl hanging on his arm, but when he saw her he flashed her a smile of recognition. She looked away. She did note, however, that he was handsome and had an engaging smile that made you want to smile back. She found a booth in the corner and ordered a beer. When the beer arrived, Jake was carrying it. He gave her a white-toothed grin before sliding onto the bench beside her.

"I knew you were a lonesome gal the first time I saw you."

"Oh yeah? What makes you think so?" Bonnie shot back, feeling her face start to burn.

"Female raft guides are either married, hooked-up, or lonely," Jake said flatly, slamming his beer down so hard the foam rolled over the sides of the glass. Bonnie wondered if he was watching her face turn red.

"I want to learn to kayak," was all she managed to say. Jake's grin broke into a laugh but, noting Bonnie's expression, it faded back into a grin.

"What is it? You think I can teach you to kayak? I don't give lessons."

"Well, Mr. Jake McCoy," Bonnie said with the sweetest southern drawl she could muster, "I'm not interested in anything you have to offer."

"We'll see about that." Jake was still smiling as he rose to go. He had walked about two steps when he turned back to Bonnie. The plaster smile had melted. "If you want . . . you can borrow my boat." He scribbled something on a napkin and handed it to Bonnie. "I don't use the boat on Wednesdays."

"But . . . today is Wednesday."

"I work on Wednesday, but today I was off." Jake looked toward the catcalls coming from the bar. "Well, sweet-cheeks, give me a call," he said in a raised voice. Bonnie looked at the napkin. In black marker was written a phone number. She could not think of a witty comeback, and was thankful when Jake had taken his place at the dartboard.

Bonnie was walking along the rim of the Gorge now. Heavy clouds loomed deep purple above the sunset and the river whis-

pered its distant roar. In her preoccupation with Jake she had wandered far from the house. Turning into the premature twilight of the forest, she made her way back to her car. A thick stand of rhododendron blocked her progress. Bonnie walked uphill until she found a break in the bushes, and once on the other side, she had to cross a wide ditch where water still flowed from the recent downpour. That's when she noticed it. Caught in a tiny pool created by miniature boulders, a syringe gleamed white against an ocher background. Bonnie stared at the object so out of place in the natural setting. Carefully she picked it up with her bandanna and examined it. The sharp point was missing, but it was definitely a medical syringe. Bonnie knew that Jake didn't do drugs, but she wasn't so sure about any of his hangers-on. She stuffed the bandanna into her pocket and looked up the path that led to the old McCoy mine. She walked uphill—her eyes focused on the gully. The forest had become so quiet . . . as if every creature were holding its breath. Then she heard voices in the distance. Bonnie froze. To her left she imagined a shadow form. The silence was jarred by a heavy sound—metal sliding—and the familiar clink that reminded her of her father's bolt-action rifle. Or maybe it was just—Bonnie stood perfectly still . . . listening. A girlish peal of laughter floated down the hill. The rustle of wet leaves—closer now. No creature breathed. Feeling a little foolish, but scared, Bonnie ran to her car, fired it up, and didn't slow down until she drove across the Bridge to Fayetteville.

Once inside the town limits, Bonnie relaxed her death-grip on the steering wheel and pulled into the convenience mart to buy a bottle of Merlot. The glove compartment yielded a corkscrew and a plastic cup. She drank a cupful and corked the bottle. Drinking alone is not good, she thought, so she drove up a steep gravel road that led to Kelly's tiny cinderblock house, dubbed *Das Bunker* for its square, spartan appearance. A soft mist rose from the long grass surrounding the house. Several cars, carelessly parked, seemed to grow out of the tall fescue. Bonnie had expected to find Kelly alone, but in the warm glow of the open door, she could see people gathered inside. Her first thought was that Kelly was having a party and she was not included, but before she could nurse one more wound, she noticed that the gathering seemed solemn—not at all the usual demeanor of whitewater guides. Bonnie entered the open screen door with her cup in one hand and the bottle of Merlot in the other. She smiled at Kelly, seated on the sofa, but Kelly did not return the greeting, so she quietly curled up in an empty chair. Bonnie and Kelly had developed a close relationship over the several summers they had guided together. Then Bonnie had returned to school, and Kelly had risen from outstanding guide to manager of Westvirginia WhiteWater, and they had

drifted apart. Still, they were friends, and Kelly had pulled her through some difficult times in the past, so it seemed natural to assume that she still had crying privileges at Das Bunker.

One of the river guides, a tall, thin kid with red hair and freckles, surveyed the faces around him. "So, what are we going to do?" he asked no one in particular.

"I agree with Kelly that we ought to wait till tomorrow morning," Mat said. Kelly's brothers stood in the background behind their older sister. Bonnie was consumed by her own thoughts. Whatever guide thing they were hashing out, she wasn't interested. She had much more pressing things on her mind—namely Jake McCoy's cheating heart. Bonnie just wished these people would leave and let her have the privacy she needed.

"I still think we ought to call the police," someone said.

"I don't think the police will get involved unless someone's been missing longer than twenty-four hours," Mat replied.

Bonnie perked up. "Who's missing?" she asked Kelly.

"One of our first-year guides took off this morning with a customer named Gina and they haven't returned. Gina's sister is rather . . . upset. No one knows exactly where they went, but we assume they headed up to Beauty Mountain or somewhere like that to do a little necking. Look," said Kelly, taking control of the conversation, "Buddy's on schedule to work the nine-o'clock trip tomorrow. If they're not back by morning, I'll call the police. Mat, you report that to the missing girl's sister tonight. Now—everyone go home."

The room cleared with Kelly's command. Bonnie waited until the last car left and then whistled through her teeth. "Looks like someone's getting fired tomorrow," she said.

"I hope that's all there is to it."

"You don't actually think they could be lost, do you? Or run off together? Come on. Those two kids are in the woods necking as we speak."

"I hope that's all there is to it," Kelly repeated.

Bonnie thought hard. "Well, what the hell do you think could have happened to them? And if you think something has happened, why don't you call the police now?"

"I'm not getting the police involved unless I absolutely have to. It wouldn't do WWW any good to have two summers in a row of bad publicity," Kelly said, referring to the customer death the previous summer.

"The guy had a heart attack, Kel. You can't be blamed for that."

"All these customers put their safety in my hands," Kelly reminded Bonnie as she picked up the bottle of Merlot. Kelly poured herself a tall glass and took a long drink. "What brought you to my doorstep tonight?"

For a fleeting moment Bonnie thought it wouldn't be fair to unburden herself to Kelly.

"How come you're not with Mr. McCoy tonight?"

That did it! "He's with Car-o-line."

"Who's that? I thought you guys were pretty solid."

"Well, 'solid' is not the way I would describe it. We're dating hot and heavy for a few months, and then he disappears for weeks at a time."

"Disappears to where?"

"Who knows? I never asked. . . . I guess now I know." Bonnie let out a long sigh.

"I always said he would break your heart." Kelly was too tired to choose her words carefully. "You know he's got a reputation for womanizing, and remember the rumors several years ago that he was growing dope on that mountain of his."

"Oh, I never believed that," Bonnie said, then remembered what was in her pocket. "Maybe some of those teenagers that hang around up there . . . or . . . what about Dwight? He's up there a lot." Bonnie stopped, realizing that she had been thinking aloud.

Kelly looked at Bonnie and said in a level voice, "You never did get to know Dwight. You made up your mind that first year we were all together that he was a turnoff, and you never gave him the time of day. I'd pick Dwight over Jake any day."

Bonnie ignored Kelly's tack in that direction. "You think those rumors are true, don't you? What insight do you have that I don't?"

"First—where does he get his money? Second—I never did trust him."

"Why not?" Bonnie asked. "Do you know something I don't?"

"I know nothing," Kelly said. "I'm making assumptions about Jake, just like you are about Dwight. But if I had to choose between the two . . ." Kelly whistled softly under her breath. "Think about it."

That night Bonnie lay awake on Kelly's sofa as her mind juggled fragmented thoughts of Jake and Dwight and syringes and missing kids. Finally, to put herself to sleep, she pushed her mind back to the time she had backed Kelly's truck into a black Mercedes and Jake McCoy had stepped out of the car. Bonnie could see him in the rearview mirror studying the fender of the Mercedes. She had pulled her head back into the safety of the truck to compose her thoughts, but it was too late. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Jake shouted as he pushed his face into the truck window. The scowl melted into a grin when he saw her. "Well, if it isn't sweet-cheeks. . . . Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't call boys," Bonnie said, her eyes level with his. She longed to ram the gas pedal to the floor and get lost on the road.

Instead she said, "My insurance company will pay," and eased down on the gas pedal. She drove a few feet with Jake's hand on the car door as he walked beside. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"You can't leave me stranded here."

"It's a dented fender!"

"Yes . . . I need a tow truck. Could you give me a lift into town?"

"It's a den-ted fen-der." Bonnie pronounced each word distinctly.

"But . . . it's a *Mercedes!*" Jake smiled as he stared into Bonnie's eyes. She felt her stomach tighten just like it did when she dropped into a big rapid.

"Get in," she said, unlocking the passenger door and feeling like she was sliding down the rapid sideways. The ride into town had turned into lunch at Smiley's and that had turned into games of pool and darts, followed by dinner and sweet conversation in the shadows of the corner booth. Smiling at her memories, Bonnie snuggled under the covers, comfortably in love with Jake again.

The next morning Bonnie awoke to the sound of jangling keys. She opened one eye and saw Dwight digging through Kelly's desk drawer. *Damn*, she thought. She quickly shut her eye. Too late.

"Sorry to wake you," Dwight said, "but Ron called in sick, and I need the keys to the video cabinet . . . gotta run the kayak video on the second trip."

"What time is it?" Bonnie asked, not bothering to open her eye again.

"It's six forty-five. . . . Get up . . . Kelly needs you to guide."

Bonnie groaned. "Any sign of those missing kids?"

"Buddy hasn't shown up yet, if that's what you mean."

Bonnie studied Dwight as he continued to rummage through the drawer. He looked as fresh as the new morning. She watched his muscles make the little blond hairs on his legs dance in the early morning sunlight.

Slowly his answer started to register in her foggy brain as she sat up on the sofa. Her head throbbed and her mouth had grown a coat of fur overnight. Bonnie retrieved her toothbrush and a change of clothing from her car and stood in the doorway of Kelly's house brushing her teeth as she looked out at the mountains marching off into the distance. She knew she should guide for Kelly, but the secret in her pocket was burning a hole in her mind. Bonnie was driven by one thought: She wanted to go back to McCoy Hill and search the gully in the daylight.

Dwight, having found the keys, walked to his Isuzu Rodeo, another of his vehicle collection. "See ya at WWW."

"Wait!" Bonnie cried. "I . . . I can't guide today . . . I . . . there's something I've got to do. Have Kelly call Jake. He'll guide for her." What a brilliant idea!

Dwight regarded Bonnie with steel-gray eyes. "Must be really important to give Kelly the shaft."

Bonnie started to say something, then clamped her mouth shut. She wondered what Dwight would say if he knew what she had found. His reaction could be very telling. Impulsively, she decided to show the syringe to Dwight and explain her plan.

"I found this last night . . . near Jake's house," she said as she pulled out the bandanna. When she unveiled her booty, Bonnie watched Dwight closely.

"What the hell?" His sleepy morning eyes popped open when he saw the syringe. "Exactly where did you find this?"

"It was in the gully that parallels the trail from the house to the mine. What do you know about it? I know Jake doesn't do drugs." Dwight looked at Bonnie with an intensity that stripped away all her secrets. "Well," she continued weakly, "he doesn't do these kind of drugs. Anyway, I want to see what else I can find. I want to go back to Jake's . . . you can get him on the river. Maybe in the daylight . . ." *Bonnie stopped, not wanting to confess her run from the boogeyman.*

Dwight ran his fingers through his hair and breathed a loud sigh. "I don't want you to go up there."

He started to put his hand on her shoulder, thought better of it, and dropped it to his side. "I don't think it's safe. Jake's got something going on up there. . . . I don't know what . . . but I've got a bad feeling about it." Dwight studied Bonnie, who was doing some mental maneuvering of her own. "Look, I know you like Jake and y'all date and all, but . . ." Bonnie looked at Dwight. This conversation was going in a direction she hadn't anticipated. "Look . . . are you determined to do this?" Bonnie just stared at him, nodding. "Because if you are, then I'll get Jake off that hill and on the river . . . one condition . . . keep your cell phone with you and turned on at all times. Okay?"

Bonnie nodded again, puzzled by this demonstration of protectiveness from Dwight, of all people.

"What's your cell-phone number?" Dwight asked as he pulled paper and pencil out of his truck. Bonnie gave him the number and Dwight drove off, his "Be careful!" hanging in the air. Now what? Home was thirty minutes away. Bonnie opted to go to WWW and face Kelly while she waited for the second trip, the nine o'clock trip that Jake and Dwight would be on, to leave for the river.

The rafting company was a flurry of activity. Customers and river guides were everywhere, and big green buses with the familiar white waves painted to make the WWW logo crowded the parking lot. Bonnie checked the river schedule tacked to the office door. The missing guide, Buddy, was scheduled to work the nine-

o'clock trip. She looked at her watch—eight-thirty. He should be here by now. Inside the office, Kelly was on the phone, customers were milling around, and the girls behind the counter looked busy. Bonnie noticed a young girl with long blond hair pulled back in a braid sitting beside the Pepsi machine. Her eyes were swollen and she looked as if she hadn't slept all night. Bonnie extended her hand in greeting, introducing herself. The girl's name was Kate. Bonnie guessed correctly that she was the missing girl's sister. Kelly's eyes fell on Bonnie as she hung up the phone. "I'm in a real jam here, Bonnie. Why wouldn't you guide for me?"

"Kelly, I'd do anything for you, but . . . not today. . . . I . . . I'll explain later," Bonnie said as she watched Kelly's face drop. Then she leaned over the counter. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Kelly glanced at Kate. "Yeah," she said. "I've called the police and they should be here any minute. Can you stick with Kate? She'll have to talk to them. Help her out in any way you can."

Bonnie guided Kate out onto the porch, where they sat down. Within minutes, a police cruiser pulled up to the office and Bonnie could feel the girl tense beside her. She recognized Officer Mulhoney as he stepped out of the car. He had taken a CPR refresher course that Bonnie had taught at the local fire station a few months back.

"Jim," she said, shaking his hand. "Kelly is tied up at the moment, but if you're here on the missing-persons report, I can help you. This is Kate, the missing girl's sister."

Jim Mulhoney took Bonnie's place and began talking to Kate. Bonnie drifted away and leaned against the locust post that supported the porch roof. She closed her eyes, listening to everyone getting ready for a day on the river, when she heard a pair of familiar voices. She opened her eyes to see Jake and Dwight walking past her. She wanted to dart out of sight, but it was too late. Bonnie steeled herself to greet Jake, but the men, their faces drawn and their eyes down, walked by her. As Bonnie puzzled over this, Kelly came out to greet the officer. Bonnie watched as Jake and Dwight made their way through the crowd of eager rafters lining up for the nine-o'clock trip.

A squelch came over the police radio, and Jim Mulhoney answered it. "Well," he said, "they've found the jeep . . . half in, half out of the river at the bottom of Pine Ridge. There's no sign of the boy or the girl. My men are down there now, and that's where I'm headed." He tipped his hat to the women. "Y'all stay here. I'll be back soon." Kelly held Kate, who dissolved into tears, and watched the police car pull away. Bonnie walked over and locked eyes with Kelly. Pine Ridge! Jake's property. Bonnie grew anxious for the trip to leave. When the bus, packed with excited rafters, finally passed the office, she noticed Dwight, not Jake, looking at her

through the bus window. Kelly took Kate into the office, allowing the door to slam in Bonnie's face. Bonnie wanted to go to Kelly, confess all, and bandage the wounded friendship. Instead she coaxed the Karmann Ghia alive once more and drove across the bridge to Jake's house.

McCoy Hill presented a different picture in the daylight. Songbirds brought the forest to life, and the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees created a golden path to the old house. Bonnie trudged up the hill to the mine. She would know when she reached the spot where she'd found the syringe by the large stand of rhododendron. She found the miniature pool, which had dried with a clear imprint of where she had swiped up the syringe with her bandanna. Bonnie's eyes scanned the ditch. As she raised her head to look up the hill, something caught her attention. The pink stood out so much against the muted greens and browns of the late summer forest that she wondered why she hadn't seen the ribbon sooner. She pulled it out of the tree gingerly, slipping her finger through the loop, and held it up to the sunlight. Such odd things—a syringe and a pink and blue hair ribbon. Bonnie thought of Car-o-line and, suppressing a surge of anger, shrugged and put the ribbon in her pocket. There was still time to explore, so she began her ascent up the ridge. She had covered a good distance before she stopped to rest. For a few moments all she could hear was her own breathing. She closed her eyes and soaked up the sounds of the forest: the murmur of the river far below, the rustle of the leaves, the snap of a twig—Bonnie's eyes popped open. A shadow had passed over the sun, and the woods once more had eyes. She jumped as a tinny "Ode to Joy" from her cell phone exploded the air. It was Dwight.

"If you're at the McCoy house—get out of there! NOW!"

Bonnie didn't need to answer. The snapping twig had become heavy footfalls. Bonnie turned and ran down the trail. She didn't want to fall in the slippery mud, but she was more afraid of slowing down. Just when she thought her legs would give out, she saw the house. When she reached her car, she looked uphill and saw something vanish into the trees. *Please start*, she prayed as the engine gave a sluggish crank. She released the key and glanced again into the woods. When she turned the key again, the car responded with a welcome whir. By the time she reached the New River Gorge Bridge she had gained enough composure to check her speedometer and slow the Ghia down to its normal driving speed. But her mind continued to race. What had chased her down the hill? Or had anything chased her down the hill? She had heard and seen something in the trees, or had she? And why Dwight's frantic call? By the time she reached WWW, Bonnie had

calmed down, but when she saw Kelly her emotions took another turn.

Kelly's face was twisted in a grimace. She sat down hard in a chair and put her face in her hands. "This just keeps getting worse," she said, shaking her head. "Dwight just called. Seems that Jake spotted Buddy . . . his body, I mean."

Bonnie gasped. "Oh no! Where?"

"He was halfway down the cliff at Pine Ridge. Jake spotted it from the river as the trip was passing by."

"And the girl? Did they fall?"

"We don't know enough at this point, except that Gina is still missing." They were walking the road to the upper campground now where Kate and her mother were waiting for news.

"Well, it's obvious what happened," Bonnie said. "They fell off the cliff."

"It certainly appears that way. But how did the jeep get into the river?"

"Stolen and dumped?"

"Well, now we just have to find Gina and hope that she tried to hike out and got herself lost . . . easy to do in these mountains." Kelly brushed a tear away and straightened her back as they approached Kate's little red tent. Bonnie hung back and let Kelly break the news to the two women. She watched Kelly talk to them, answering their questions, trying to give them hope for Gina's safe return. Bonnie admired Kelly's ability to empathize with total strangers as she had admired her strengths on the river. Kelly's pager beeped a 911, announcing the end of the visit.

"We'll be back again as soon as we hear anything new, Mrs. Sanders." Kelly passed out comforting hugs before heading back to the office.

The parking area was a nest of activity as wet, happy rafters returned from the river. As Kelly and Bonnie started up the office steps, Carla, the leader for that morning's eight-o'clock trip, stepped out the door. "The nine-o'clock is going to be late," she announced.

"I would expect so," Kelly said. "They had to wait for the police to show up. They ought to be heading back about now."

"No . . . I mean . . . the police won't let them leave."

"ANY of them? I can see them keeping Jake, but the whole trip full of tourists? If they don't start off that river now, they'll be paddling in the dark. Nancy, get me the police . . . we're going to have a mind meld." The door slammed behind Kelly, and Bonnie was alone. All she could do now was wait for Dwight and Jake to return. Bonnie sat on the porch steps nursing her last thought. Dwight and Jake . . . not Jake and Dwight. Well, who wouldn't be confused after a day like today, she reasoned? Then she turned her

thoughts to poor Buddy and the missing girl. Bonnie thought a silent prayer and began her vigil.

The second trip returned full of tired and puzzled rafters still wondering why a raft guide and the video man bailed out of the trip before the final rapid. It had turned into night by the time Dwight and Jake returned in the police car. Officer Mulhoney dropped them off at the office, and Kelly slipped into the patrol car to have some privacy as she questioned Jim. Bonnie watched her drop her head into her hands and felt a sympathetic pang of agony. Kelly thanked Jim and he drove away.

"Well, I guess your Mr. McCoy is some kind of hero . . . spotting Buddy like that."

Bonnie didn't respond. Instead she stared at Kate, who had walked over and sat on the porch steps. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a long braid tied with a pink and blue ribbon.

"How old is your sister?" Bonnie asked Kate.

"Eighteen . . . same as me . . . we're twins. Why?"

"Do you dress alike?"

"Sometimes . . . why?"

Bonnie looked at Kelly and started to say something, but at that moment Jake and Dwight entered the porch circle of light. Both had just showered, and Bonnie couldn't help but notice that Jake smelled of Old Spice. Bonnie locked eyes with Kelly and head-gestured toward Smiley's, a short walk away. Kelly hugged Kate, sending her back to Mrs. Sanders with hopeful comments. "Let's get dinner," she said.

As they walked to Smiley's and squeezed into the corner booth, Jake tried to bask in the glow of his fifteen minutes for finding Buddy. He didn't seem to notice the grim expressions on the faces of his three companions, but when Bonnie waved the barmaid away it got Jake's attention. Without a word, Bonnie reached into her pocket and produced a yellow bandanna, unfolding it to reveal the syringe. "What's this, Jake?"

"Wow, Bonnie . . . you shooting up?"

Bonnie tightened her lips. "I saw you with Caroline and . . . I don't know why but . . . I went up to your house." Jake started to say something. Bonnie hushed him with a look. "That's where I found the syringe . . . and this." Bonnie reached into her pocket and produced the satin ribbon. Jake guffawed, but Kelly's eyes widened and darted to Bonnie.

"So some flunky at my place had some illegal . . . What the hell does a ribbon have to do with anything?"

"The missing girl," Kelly jumped in. "She has a twin sister . . . who happens to be wearing a pink and blue ribbon."

Dwight watched Jake's face crumple and seized the moment. "Jake, what the hell is happening on that hill of yours? You might

as well tell us before you have to tell the cops. You spotted Buddy hanging from the side of that cliff. You spotted him 'cause you *knew* he was there. Now we have proof the girl was at your place. . . . Where is she?"

"Is she alive?" Kelly's voice was beginning to crack.

Bonnie watched as Jake, white as a sheet, raised his hands in a futile gesture of surrender and let them fall into his lap. Head lowered, he whispered, "I didn't kill them. I'd never do a thing like that. It was Bad Butch. Butch is a little addled and mean as a rattlesnake. I hired him to guard the mine and the road leading to it."

"That old abandoned coal mine?" Bonnie said. "What on earth for?"

"Illegal dumping," Dwight suggested. "Medical waste. Companies pay a lot of money to dispose of that shit in these hills."

Jake answered with silence. Kelly sat stunned by the realization that Gina was dead. "Where is the girl?" she asked Jake.

"In the mine."

Kelly pulled her cell phone off her belt and punched in a number she had memorized. "Officer Mulhoney, this is Kelly. Please meet me at the Route 19 Bar and Grill immediately. There's been a . . . development."

After Officer Mulhoney led Jake away, they sat in silence. Kelly was screwing up her courage to go and relate the tragic news to Kate and her mother. Dwight watched Bonnie with a curious mix of sympathy and concern. Bonnie sat in her own personal fog, trying to sort out her feelings for Jake—the old ones and the new ones. She didn't even notice that Dwight had taken her hand in his. But Kelly did, and a weak smile surfaced through tears.

"When you called me at Jake's . . . on my cell . . . what . . . how did you know?"

Dwight looked into Bonnie's eyes. "I've suspected something for a while. When Jake spotted the body . . . I knew . . . well, I knew that I shouldn't have let you go up there." There was a flicker of change in Bonnie's eyes. "Bonnie . . . we had to do it. I mean, even without the killings . . . the illegal dumping . . . that can't be allowed. These are our mountains, our people." Dwight emphasized his statement with a squeeze to Bonnie's hand.

Bonnie looked down at her hand in Dwight's but did not withdraw it. Instead she returned his squeeze and said, "I understand." ●

THE FACE OF ALI BABA

by Edward D. Hoch

Long ago, when he was a boy playing in the desert village of his birth, he'd had another name. But that was so far in the past he'd almost forgotten what it was. Now, to his growing band of followers and the bulk of the world's press, he was merely Ali Baba the terrorist, the man who'd planned the devastating attacks on New York and London and Paris.

The nations of the world had risen up against him, with every major intelligence service on his trail. He'd been forced to shave his beard and flee his homeland, escaping through the checkpoints in a coffin beneath the embalmed body of an old woman. Now he needed a destination, someplace where they would not think of seeking him out, yet someplace close enough so he could still contact and command his followers.

His first action had been to pay a small fortune to a plastic surgeon in New Delhi to make certain changes in his appearance.

Sometime after the operation, when he was certain of its success, he ordered the surgeon and another man run down by trucks and killed. He was covering his tracks.

It was a few weeks later, in early April, when Rand's plane touched down in Pakistan. Much as he disliked the assignment that had brought him out of retirement once again, he realized that he had no one to blame but himself. The previous year he'd successfully captured a killer on Crete with links to a terrorist network, and British Intelligence had ways of remembering accomplishments like that.

When the Cold War ended, many in mystery fiction wondered what would happen to the spy story. Nowadays, of course, terrorism is an incapable subject for the genre. Edward D. Hoch's Jeffery Rand, retired from the Department of Concealed Communications in Britain's secret service, is an ideal sleuth/spy for a story about the world's most-wanted terrorist. Not Bin Laden, the fictional Ali Baba. . . . †

This was the biggest one of all, he knew. The man known throughout the world as Ali Baba was a terrorist and leader of terrorists. "You get this one," he'd been told, "and it could mean a knighthood from the Queen."

Rand had studied Ali Baba's photographs at length, always aware that he might look entirely different now. Some said he did not have the classic features of a true Arab, and might have a bit of Indian blood in him. It had been a year since he'd been photographed in Pakistan, and that was where the trail ended. The terrorist leader had no siblings or known relatives, nowhere he would likely go to hide. The man who would help Rand pick up the trail, in Multon, was named Hugh Draper, an Englishman who'd spent a good portion of his life in the Middle East. He had a tanned and weathered face, a product of the dry desert air in that part of Pakistan and neighboring India. A contract employee of various intelligence services, at the moment he was working for the British.

"Mr. Rand, I'm happy to give you any help I can, but you realize it must be somewhat limited. We believe Ali Baba was here and then gone, before any of us ever saw this photograph."

The picture in question appeared to show the terrorist's face, minus his familiar beard, engaged in conversation with another man. "Have you identified this man?" Rand asked.

"It is a local undertaker, Verier Rangoli. A newspaper took it months ago but didn't use it until last month when he died. Ali Baba, if that is really he, gave the photographer a fictitious name, and the few people who saw the photo didn't recognize him. It wasn't until some time after they published it that our man at the British Embassy spotted a similarity to younger pictures of Ali Baba without his beard."

"Have you questioned the photographer?"

"Of course," Draper told him. "A reporter had interviewed the undertaker for a story and then sent a photographer around for pictures. He snapped about a dozen of Rangoli talking to families and arranging funerals. He remembered this man didn't want his picture used, claimed he was arranging for the funeral of an elderly aunt. They didn't use it at first and it went into the file, but after Rangoli's death the photo editor dug it out and ran it."

"What did Rangoli die of?"

"Street accident. A truck hit him. Nothing unusual in these parts."

Rand's expertise during his years with British Intelligence had been with codes and ciphers, but he'd learned a good deal more than that. "You must have the date this photo was taken. We could check the funeral home's records for the supposed aunt."

"I've already done it. It was at the end of November. There were

no burials here that week, only a body shipped back home to New Delhi in a hearse."

"What better way to slip across the border than inside a coffin?"

"These days the lids are opened at the border. We know all their tricks."

Rand thought about it. "Ali Baba is not a large man, neither in height nor weight. He might have left the country in that same coffin, concealed beneath the old woman's body."

"Who would travel hundreds of miles like that?" Draper asked.

"He only had to travel a few miles across the border. Once inside India the hearse would have stopped so he could come out of hiding."

"Would Ali Baba have chanced that?"

"No," Rand decided on further thought. "It would be safest to remain in the coffin for the entire journey. How far is it from the Indian border to New Delhi?"

"About two hundred miles. You pick up the national highway as soon as you cross and it takes you directly to the capital."

"Little more than a three-hour journey on a good highway. I think we can assume that Ali Baba escaped across the border in that coffin and then traveled all the way to the capital in it."

"If that was really him in the photo," Draper cautioned. "I have a car if you wish to make the trip."

Rand smiled. "I'm retired. I have nothing better to do than follow up on false leads."

"No wife left behind?"

"She lectures on archaeology at Reading University. I hope she's missing me about now."

New Delhi is a twentieth-century city built on a site adjoining old Delhi after India's capital was moved there from Calcutta in 1911. It took nearly twenty years to build, and with its symmetrical street layout and Western architectural style it reminded Rand of Washington, D.C. Mainly the nation's administrative center, the city also boasted a few manufacturing, printing, and textile plants. The body of the elderly woman had been consigned to the Bundi Funeral Home near the city's center, and they picked up the trail there.

Jawahar Bundi was a short swarthy man in a red turban who seemed disturbed by Rand's questions. Yes, he had received the body in question the previous November. The date of the interment was here in his records. New Delhi was not like some areas of India, where bodies were burned or left for the vultures.

"Did you open the coffin?" Rand asked.

"Of course! Three of her nephews insisted on being present when I did so, to verify that it was really their aunt."

"Did you leave them alone with the body?"

The undertaker nodded. "They wanted some private time to pray over her."

Rand nodded. "I expected as much."

He asked Bundi if he had seen a fourth person with them as they left, but the undertaker shook his head. "It was strange, though," he said, digging back in his memory. "The one nephew came out and made arrangements for the burial. He said the others had already left by the back door."

So Ali Baba, in all likelihood, had been in New Delhi four months ago. But where was he now?

Back at their hotel, Rand and Draper pondered the question. "He'd need to change his appearance," Draper decided, stating the obvious.

"Plastic surgery?"

"Probably. He shaved off his beard at once, of course, but that wouldn't be enough."

Rand considered the possibilities. "He still looked the same, minus the beard, in that Pakistan photo. He wouldn't have had time to have the surgery there before being smuggled out of the country in that coffin, but once he was here—"

"We must check the plastic surgeons," Draper agreed.

The list was not a long one even though it covered both Delhi and New Delhi. Draper's knowledge of Hindi helped immensely on the telephone, but the first two calls were not promising. "The first one refused to answer any questions on the grounds of patient confidentiality, and the second one's been dead since last month."

Rand's eyes left the front page of the English-language newspaper he'd been scanning. "Dead how?"

"Traffic accident. Hit by a truck while crossing the street."

"Wasn't that what happened to the undertaker back in Pakistan last month?"

"I believe you're right," Draper agreed. "Odd coincidence, isn't it?"

"Perhaps too odd to be a coincidence," Rand decided.

The following morning they set off on foot for the deceased surgeon's office to learn what they could about his death. It was some distance from their hotel, in old Delhi, where the streets were crowded with bicycles and cars, all openly ignoring the traffic lights. Down the block Rand could see a cow in the street, further impeding progress. The sidewalks were not much better, crowded with street musicians and, in one case, a young man carrying a cobra in an open basket as he sought a suitable place to entertain the crowds.

"That could be dangerous," Rand commented. The cobra reared its head as if preparing to strike.

"Their fangs are usually removed as a precaution," Draper assured him. "Here we are."

The building was red sandstone, like many in the city, but seemed more recent than those around it and boasted a variety of professional offices for doctors and dentists. They sought out the Chandra Clinic on the third floor. Its waiting room was crowded, but they found an Englishwoman named Susan Withers who was the office manager and willing to help.

"The clinic is continuing, though Dr. Chandra's untimely death was a blow to us all," she informed them. She appeared to be in her forties, with dark hair in a neat bun and a solemn demeanor that went well with her tweed suit.

Rand informed her they were seeking a male patient who may have had plastic surgery in late November or early December. "An Arab, perhaps."

"We make no distinction here," she told him.

"Would it be possible to check your records of Dr. Chandra's patients during that period? The surgery would probably have been on the face."

"Face work was his specialty. Many of his patients are women trying to look a bit younger. Some come here from the film studios in Bombay, or Mumbai as it's now called." She bit her lower lip, pondering their request. "Is this government business?"

"British government business," Rand made clear. "The Indian government is not involved at this point."

Susan Withers left her desk and walked to a filing cabinet. She returned with seven folders covering the period in question. "If he were still alive, Dr. Chandra would never allow this. These are all of his male patients during that period."

Rand glanced at the patient names on the file tabs. He hadn't expected to find Ali Baba's name, and the ones that were there meant nothing to him. *Guijarey, Karni, Lakshmi, Masese, Mughal, Nautch, Surai*. "Are any of these familiar?" he asked Draper.

"Can't say that they are."

Together they read over the patients' descriptions. All were in their late thirties or forties, close to Ali Baba's age, and all had addresses in India. Their heights and weights were not recorded. "Do you have any before-and-after photographs?" Rand asked.

"Dr. Chandra kept those at home. He was very proud of some of his results."

"Do you have his address? Perhaps his wife could—"

"Dr. Chandra was divorced and lived alone. I don't know what happened to his personal effects."

Rand took down the names and addresses of the seven male patients, and then asked for Dr. Chandra's address as well. Susan Withers studied him for a moment, then flipped open the Rolodex on her desk. "You won't find anything," she promised.



She was right. Dr. Chandra's apartment had already been rented. The building's owner spoke of relatives who had removed a few pieces of furniture. He'd purchased some other pieces from them. He knew nothing of any papers or photographs.

"It appears to be a dead end," Hugh Draper said. They had stopped in an Indian coffeehouse across the street to get their bearings and review the situation.

"Of course we may be all wrong about the plastic surgeon. Ali Baba might not have needed one here in New Delhi. He may have had transportation arranged out of the country. Or he may have gone to a different surgeon. Chandra's accident might have been just that—an accident."

"Perhaps we'll never know."

"I don't like loose ends," Rand told him. "There've been too many in this part of the world over the last couple of years."

That was when a tall, large man approached them, wearing a turban that identified him as a member of the Sikh religion. "Pardon me," he said in educated English, "but are you the chaps who inquired after Dr. Chandra?"

"We are," Rand admitted. "We were sorry to learn of his misfortune."

"I am Dr. Aafia Fareed, from Kolkata—or Calcutta, as the English called it. Dr. Chandra was a close friend. We went through medical school in England and served together in a bomb-removal squad with the Indian army before setting up our practices. I arrived at his former apartment just after you'd left. The manager thought he saw you come over this way."

Rand shook hands and introduced himself and Draper. "Do you know any details about his death?"

The turbaned doctor shook his head. "Only that he was run down by a truck last month while crossing the street to his office. The news was very upsetting to me, but I had surgery scheduled and could not get away until now." He motioned to an empty chair. "May I join you?"

"Please do," Rand said, feeling that this doctor might contribute something to their search. "Was the truck driver questioned by police?"

"I understand that he fled the scene, not unusual in these crowded streets."

"Are you a plastic surgeon like Dr. Chandra?" Draper asked.

Fareed shook his head. "Ear, nose, and throat. I perform corrective surgery, but nothing that is strictly cosmetic. We had been friends for a long time, however."

Rand asked, "Were you in touch with him recently?"

"He phoned me from here the day before his death."

"And said what?"

"That he feared for his life. He had performed plastic surgery on a wanted man for a large sum of money, and already he was regretting it."

"Did you report that to the police?"

He shook his head sadly. "I did not take him seriously. The next day his office manager, Susan Withers, notified me of the accident. I could not be here for the memorial service, but I come now in hopes of learning something about his death."

"You believe he was murdered?"

"I do not know what to think."

Rand decided to tell him what they knew. "We have reason to believe the man Dr. Chandra operated on was the notorious terrorist leader known as Ali Baba. Apparently he escaped from Pakistan in the false bottom of a coffin which was delivered to a funeral home here."

"Ali Baba," Fareed repeated the name. "Some think he must be dead."

"But we think he's very much alive." Rand took the patient list from his pocket. "If we're right, the name he's using could be one of these seven. They're all of Chandra's male patients through the end of the year. Guijarey, Karni, Lakshmi, Masese, Mughal, Nautch, and Surai. Do the names mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

Rand stared at them again, and suddenly he was back at his desk at Concealed Communications, pondering an enemy cipher. The answer leapt out at him, so clearly that he wondered why he hadn't seen it at once. "This one!" he said suddenly, pointing a finger. "What address do we have for Masese?"

"Masese?" Draper scanned his list. "He lives in Jaipur. But how do you know it's him?"

"What word would be most important to a criminal using the name of Ali Baba? *Masese* is an anagram of *Sesame*."

Dr. Fareed, who knew the country, agreed to accompany them to Jaipur, a city about a hundred and fifty miles southwest of New Delhi. "It is called the pink city," he told them as they drove toward it along a wide paved highway with low mountains rising on either side. "The largest in the state of Rajasthan. By law, all buildings in the old city must be painted deep saffron pink. It is said the city was freshly painted in eighteen seventy-six for a visit by the Prince of Wales, and the tradition continues today." He spoke from the backseat, and Rand noticed he was trimming his nails with a pair of surgical scissors while he talked.

"I thought Sikhs wore small daggers inside their shirts," he remarked to the man.

"Many do, but I do not. These scissors serve most of my wants."

The old portion of the city was indeed pink, but that was only the beginning of the riot of color that awaited them. Women wore bright red and orange head coverings in the streets, and the men were no less colorful with their turbans. "Often you can tell a man's hometown and profession from his turban," Fareed said, "though I do not have that skill. You will notice this is a city of very wide streets, carefully laid out. It is also a city where much polo is played, not merely on horseback but on elephants and even bicycles."

Overlooking it all was the Amber Fort, a huge place on a hill north of Jaipur, with a commanding view of all around it. Begun in the eleventh century, it was later expanded to become a retreat for battle-weary maharajas. Originally, Fareed told them, it had to be reached by elephant up winding trails past seven fortified gates.

They passed an elephant being led by its keeper along the street. Its legs had been painted with a variety of intricate designs. "I wonder if he knows how pretty he looks," Draper said.

The address given by the patient M. Masese proved to be a convent of Catholic nursing sisters on Hospital Road. A gated fence surrounded the place and they could see an elderly gardener working among the flowers. It seemed like another dead end, but Dr. Fareed insisted that they investigate further. A short white-bearded priest who looked like a stuffed Father Christmas in his brown cassock and sandals came out to greet them. "Are you in need of nursing help?" he asked Fareed after the doctor had introduced himself.

"No, we are seeking a lost friend of mine, a man named Masese who gave this as his address."

"We know of no Masese here," the priest told them. "I am Father Briese of the Franciscan Order. I tend to the nursing sisters who reside here." His accent might have been French, but Rand could not be sure. "Let me call Sister Ruth."

They followed him into the convent with its dark woodwork and antique furnishings. It occurred to Rand that the place probably dated from late Victorian times, when the Queen herself had been proclaimed Empress of India. They waited a few moments until the priest returned, followed by a middle-aged woman in a white habit. "I am Sister Ruth," she said in a deep, almost masculine voice. "Welcome to the Convent of the Little Flower."

"We seek a man named Masese who is said to live here," Rand told her. "Do you know of such a person?"

She glanced over at Father Briese. "Do we? No, there are only the sisters here."

"We saw a gardener as we entered," Draper said. "Might he know something about this neighborhood?"

Sister Ruth peered out the window at the old man. "Cassim? He only came after his brother, our previous gardener, was taken ill at the beginning of the year. You might ask him if you wish. We have

nothing to hide here.”

Rand went out to speak with the old man, bent like a hunchback over his flowers. “Are you Cassim?”

“That I am,” the man admitted, straightening up a bit. His English was good, probably dating back to the colonial influence on his country. “What do you want?”

“We’re searching for a man named Masese. He may have been receiving mail at this address.”

The name had sparked some recognition in his eyes. “I have seen him.”

“What does he look like?”

The man did not answer at once, until finally Rand slipped him a few coins. Then he said, “Middle-aged, clean-shaven, about my height. Possibly an Arab. He paid me to pick up some mail for him and deliver it to an address outside the city. I did it just once. There has been no more since then.”

“How long ago was this?”

“About a month, perhaps longer.”

“The mail was addressed to him here, at the convent?”

“Yes. It was from a doctor’s office in New Delhi.”

Hugh Draper and Dr. Fareed had come out to join them now, and Rand told them what he’d learned. “Can you take us there?” Fareed asked at once.

The old gardener stared up at the sky, as if for some divine revelation. “It will be dark soon,” he decided. “We could not reach the house before nightfall.”

“It is important that we go now,” Draper insisted, and this time it was he who gave the gardener some rupees.

The man laid down his tools. “This can be finished in the morning. It is already too dim for my poor eyesight. Let us go.”

Rand told Father Briese that their gardener knew of the man they sought and was taking them to him. Then all four piled into Hugh Draper’s car, with Cassim riding in back with Dr. Fareed. Rand was beginning to feel a bit like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, acquiring three traveling companions as she went off to see the Wizard.

“Drive west,” Cassim instructed, “toward the desert.”

“The desert is a long way.”

“It is not that far to the house you seek. It is only on the outskirts of Jaipur.”

They passed elaborate palaces and forts, spectacular even in the twilight. Draper was breathing hard. “You know, if this is the man we think it is, he’ll be dangerous.”

“There are four of us,” Rand said to reassure him. He doubted if they would find the elusive Ali Baba this easily.

They passed the railway station and entered the residential part of the city, carefully laid out in square blocks. Presently they

were traveling along a darkened highway. "This road leads to Bagru, but we will not be going that far," the gardener told them. "Do you see that sign up ahead?"

Rand could see nothing but after a moment Draper said, "Yes, I see it."

"Turn left there. We are almost to our destination."

They were on a lane much narrower than the highway, and Cassim had them pull off the road to park. All was in darkness, lit only by the moon overhead. As he left the car Rand could hear the distant haunting sound of a flute, which Dr. Fareed identified as a *satara*, actually a double flute. "It is the sound of the desert," he told them. "Melodious yet somehow strange."

Draper opened the glove compartment and took a small flashlight and pistol from it. "Better to be safe," he explained.

The old gardener hung back as they started for the darkened house with Fareed in the lead. It was a one-story stone building, no different from others along the lane. "No one seems to be home," Fareed said, using the knocker on the door. The music in the distance had ceased, and all was silence.

Draper reached around him and tried the door. "It's unlocked."

"You two go around to the rear," Fareed suggested, "in case he tries to escape."

Rand sent Draper to the back while he stayed at the front corner of the house, keeping his eye on Fareed and the gardener. Cassim still stood near the car, and had turned away from the house. Fareed carefully swung the door open, bending low as if to pick something up from the floor. The doctor stepped inside and suddenly yelled, "He's here!"

Rand hurried toward the front door as two gunshots sounded. He saw Cassim stagger and fall forward on his face. "Fareed!" he shouted.

"I'm in here, on the floor. Be careful!"

There was a smashing of glass at the back of the house and Draper came through the rear door. His flashlight picked out Fareed lying among some bottles and rags. Rand saw that Draper held the small automatic in his right hand. "I didn't fire," he said.

"Someone did." As he spoke, Rand remembered the old man out in front. He ran outside, followed by the others, and fell to his knees beside the body. They could see the blood from the wounds to his head and back.

"He's dead," Fareed said.

"Give me your gun," Rand demanded, holding out his hand to Draper. He put the pistol to his nose and sniffed. It didn't seem to have been fired.

"He's still in there," Draper said. "And we're sitting ducks out here in the moonlight!"

But Rand shook his head. "If he wanted to shoot us he'd have done it already. Come on, there may be another way out of there."

Using Draper's flashlight, he found a switch and turned on the room's only lamp. There were few furnishings, with some Indian-style miniature paintings on the walls. On a shelf lay a copy of the Koran. "A Muslim house, certainly," Rand said. He went quickly through the kitchen, bedroom, and bath, finding nothing. All the windows were locked, and Draper had only gained entrance by smashing the glass in the locked back door.

"Here's a trapdoor to the basement!" Draper called out. He lifted it slowly and Rand pointed the flashlight down, then started climbing down a rickety ladder. Draper and Dr. Fareed followed.

A pile of wooden boxes lined one wall of the small room. Rand lifted the lid on one, unable to decipher the stenciled Hindi printing. "Sticks of dynamite," he announced. "Enough to blow this house over the moon." He picked up a vest of heavy cloth. "It looks like he was fitting them into these vests for suicide bombings."

Draper had spotted something else. "This looks like a tunnel!"

"Ali Baba's escape route," Fareed said.

"Perhaps." Rand took the flashlight and Draper's gun, bending slightly so he could walk through the low tunnel. It had been carved from stone for most of its length, finally coming out over a hundred feet away. Rand brushed the spider webs from his path and stepped into another basement, obviously that of a neighboring house. He quickly searched both basement and upstairs, but the place was empty, devoid even of furniture. Like the first house, it seemed to have no telephone.

The others came along behind him. "Nothing here?" Draper asked.

"Not a thing. This was, as you say, his escape route. When he saw us split up to surround the house he knew he couldn't kill us all. Cassim was the unlucky one, probably because Ali Baba recognized him and knew he'd led us here."

"We must report the body and these explosives to the police," Draper said.

"We will do that, as soon as we find a telephone."

Off in the distance, he could hear the sound of the mournful flute once more drifting across the night air.

The following morning Rand awoke in his room at the Jaipur Palace, a medium-priced hotel some three miles from the city. Hugh Draper and Dr. Fareed occupied adjoining rooms. Rand thought about phoning his wife Leila at home in Reading, but then remembered it would be five and a half hours earlier there. Time zones were difficult enough to remember without the odd half-hour tacked on in some parts of the world.

The hotel was modern, though designed with the look of an Indian palace. He phoned Fareed and Draper, arranging to meet them at their doors for breakfast downstairs at nine. The tall Indian doctor was not yet ready when he knocked. He came out of the bathroom apologetically, in his underwear, wiping his newly washed hair. "Let me slip into my pants and shirt. I'll only be a minute."

Over a continental breakfast, with an Indian meal for Dr. Fareed, Rand raised the possibility that Ali Baba might not have been living at that house at all. "Someone who knew or suspected we would go there might have driven out ahead of us and laid a trap."

"That still makes it Ali Baba or one of his aides," Draper said.

"There is one thing we are forgetting," Dr. Fareed chimed in. "Plastic surgery can do amazing things these days. My old friend Dr. Chandra once gave a new face to a man who'd had a sex-change operation, helping convert him to a female."

"I doubt that Ali Baba has had a sex change," Rand remarked.

He had not given his name to the police when he called to report the killing and the stash of explosives. Thus he was surprised to see Father Briese enter the lobby accompanied by a police officer and point them out as they were finishing breakfast.

The uniformed lieutenant asked for identification and Draper pretended innocence, asking the priest what had happened. "Our gardener, Cassim, was shot to death on the road to Bagru," the chubby priest explained. "We cannot afford to lose two gardeners in such a short time. I told Lieutenant Kota that he had left with three visitors."

The officer smiled, enjoying his triumph. "It was an English voice that phoned in the report of the murder. With Father Briese's descriptions it was fairly easy to locate you."

Rand immediately accepted full responsibility, and when they went upstairs to his room he identified himself and gave the officer a number in London that he could call. He told the story of the search for Ali Baba.

"So," Lieutenant Kota said, "you are on the trail of the famous terrorist. You found him at that little house but he shot the gardener Cassim and escaped?"

"That's exactly what happened," Hugh Draper agreed, and Dr. Fareed confirmed it.

"But did you actually see Ali Baba?"

"No," Rand admitted. Perhaps the man was only a phantom, a profitable product for media headlines. And yet, the Pakistani undertaker was dead, Dr. Chandra was dead, and Cassim the gardener was dead.

"How did you trace him here?" the officer wanted to know.

"Dr. Chandra had been killed by a truck, the same as the Pakistani undertaker. We checked his male patients and discovered

one of them was named Masese. It's an anagram for Sesame, if you remember your Arabian Nights."

"Would a terrorist killer likely engage in such word games, Mr. Rand?"

"I think he did. I think the explosives and the bomb-making equipment we found in that basement prove it was indeed Ali Baba."

"And you say he escaped through a basement tunnel to an adjoining house?"

"It was the only way out. The house had just two doors and the windows were locked. He couldn't have gotten by us, even in the dark."

"One of your party had a weapon?"

"I had a gun," Draper said, "but it wasn't fired."

Lieutenant Kota puzzled over their story. "Doesn't it seem strange that a terrorist in hiding would leave his front door unlocked?"

"Perhaps he was expecting someone," Rand suggested.

The police lieutenant rose to his feet. "I would like your pistol, Mr. Draper. I will return it to you after we've done some ballistic tests on the bullets that killed the gardener."

Draper handed it over. "Does this mean we have to stay around?"

"We'll know immediately if the caliber of the weapon is different. You could be free to leave by this afternoon."

After he left, they pondered what to do next. Hugh Draper walked to the window and looked out at the passing traffic. "We seem to be at a dead end regarding Ali Baba. If it really was him in that house, he could be across another border by now."

"Perhaps," Dr. Fareed said, "but never forget that India is a nation of illusions. Remember the famous Indian Rope Trick? And we once had a maharaja who rode into battle on a horse fitted with a fake elephant trunk. Enemy horses mistook it for an elephant and were intimidated by it, and even enemy elephants hesitated to attack it."

"Illusion," Rand murmured. "That's really what it's all about, isn't it?"

"To a degree."

"Any of the people we talked to might be Ali Baba. He might be that priest, Father Briese, or even Sister Ruth. Except—"

"Except what?"

"Except that Ali Baba was never in that house last night, was he?"

Both of them appeared puzzled. "He had to be!" Hugh Draper insisted. "Otherwise, who fired those shots?"

"A good question. Consider this: You were at the back door, Dr. Fareed had just entered the front door, and I was at the corner of the house. All the windows were locked. If Ali Baba or someone else in the house fired the shots that killed Cassim, his only means of escape was into the basement and through the tunnel to

the adjoining house.”

“We knew that last night.”

“But I was the first one through that tunnel,” Rand reminded him, “and I had to break through cobwebs on the far end. No one escaped that way last night. The shots that killed Cassim had to have been fired by one of you two.”

“You smelled my gun,” Draper reminded him. “It hadn’t been fired.”

“That’s right. You might have had a second one, but I doubt it. You didn’t break the glass until after the shots, when you reached in to unlock the door. Even if you were already inside, it would have been a difficult shot, firing around Fareed here, a large man, to hit Cassim out there in front of the house, lit only by moonlight.”

“You’re saying I shot him?” the doctor asked. “If I had a gun, what happened to it?”

“When I entered the house after you, I found you on the floor by a pile of rags. It would have been easy to slide the gun under them and retrieve it later when we left the house.”

“Do you think that I am Ali Baba?”

Rand shook his head. “I know that you’re not. You’re a large man, and we established that he was small enough to have hidden in that coffin. I even considered the possibility that you might wear artificial legs, but I saw you this morning in your underwear.”

“Then why would I kill that gardener?”

“I want you to tell me,” Rand said. “I saw you stoop for something as you entered that house.”

Dr. Fareed hesitated, and then said, “Chandra was my old friend. When I heard how he died I knew I must avenge his death. I brought the gun with me for that purpose. When I saw Cassim linger behind and then actually turn away as we entered the house, I remembered my bomb-removal training. I felt near the floor for a trip-wire used on booby traps, and cut it with my scissors. Then I turned and shot Cassim twice in the back.”

“On that evidence alone?”

“Cassim said his eyesight was poor, yet he saw that road sign long before us. The house was prepared in advance for just such an eventuality. The terrorist Ali Baba had no brothers, but the legendary Ali Baba did. In the Arabian Nights his brother’s name was Cassim, one more use of the old story, like his anagram of Sesame. You see, plastic surgeons can make a person look young, but they can also make him look older than his years if necessary. Ali Baba was the replacement gardener who came to the convent a few months back. Ali Baba was Cassim.”

Rand sighed, knowing it was true, even though it might never be proven. He stared at Dr. Fareed and asked, “Now what am I going to do with you?” ●



THE LION OF THE CHAMA

by David Edgerley Gates

Circumstance is often the engine of a story, and the hinge of mischance that brought Benny Salvador out of retirement, and brought his past back uninvited, began as a traffic stop, a seemingly minor incident that resulted in a major embarrassment.

A couple of patrol officers in a black-and-white pulled over a car they said afterwards they'd noticed was driving erratically. The guy behind the wheel showed them his license and registration, and when he was asked to step out of the vehicle, he didn't have any beef with it. The awkward part was that both cops knew him. The driver was Eufemio Maestas, an elected local judge. The cops had appeared in his court before, and would again. They administered the common field sobriety test known as Eye Nystagmus: Can the subject focus on a moving finger, say, or a flashlight, using his eyes without turning his head? Judge Maestas failed the test.

At this point, the patrol officers made a mistake. To his credit, the judge had never suggested they let him slide. Of course, neither of the cops wanted to write him up. The smart move would have been for one of them to get into the judge's car and drive him

home, with his partner following in the cruiser, and there'd be an end to it. Not to mention that they would have held a marker on the judge afterwards, and that might have come in handy. But then the guy sitting shotgun presented a problem. Not to mention that one of the cops recognized the judge's passenger, too. The situation was getting a little thick, to say the least, and they decided to call it in to their shift supervisor for advice, which is where they screwed the pooch. Communications to dispatch were recorded and logged, and the police blotter was a routine newspaper feature.

"I don't get it," Benny Salvador remarked. "Are these guys dumb, or just too honest?"

Johnny Lee Montoya shrugged. "It was a no-win proposition, and they had to cover their butts," he said.

They were having breakfast burritos at El Merendero, in an alley off Galisteo, down in Santa Fe. Montoya had called the meeting, so it was his treat. They'd known each other more than forty years. Benny had been county sheriff up in Rio Arriba for twenty-five of them, and Johnny Lee had put in his thirty with the New Mexico state cops. They were older now, long since past active duty, but they still owed each other favors.

"How'd you come to be involved in this?" Benny asked the former state trooper. What he really wanted to know was why anybody, in this day and age, would call on either one of them. Johnny Lee took his meaning.

"The way it was," he said. "The way it is." He looked at Benny and sighed. "Caesar's wife."

Benny shook his head, smiling. "Same song, different day."

"They're running scared." Johnny Lee sat back and folded his arms. "They don't want a rerun."

They was the Powers That Be, the Rio Arriba county commissioners, the state reps in the Roundhouse, professional politicians with too much to lose if the bottom fell out of the pork barrel. All the cozy relationships carefully built up over the years would fall apart in a corruption investigation, one that might even bring in the Feds if things snowballed and the state A.G.'s office couldn't contain the damage. Benny almost laughed out loud. Caesar's

Edgar-nominated short story writer David Edgerley Gates currently lives in Santa Fe. He takes up Southwestern themes in his first story for *EQMM*, a tale loosely based on something that actually happened there thirty years ago. As he explained to us, the background, including water-rights issues, is accurate. But though "the courthouse siege may be history, my treatment of it is invention." †

wife. They wanted Johnny Lee Montoya and Benny Salvador because the two old lawmen were above reproach. No dirt had ever stuck to them. Rio Arriba had gotten in bad odor after Benny Salvador retired. For a time, people said it was the most corrupt county in New Mexico, which was going some, because there was serious competition for the title. Now, all these years later, Benny understood what Johnny Lee Montoya was telling him, that nobody wanted a reminder of those lawless days, or the scrutiny such open violation of the public interest could invite.

"Last time around, it got papered over," Johnny Lee said.

"Last time, I took a bullet," Benny reminded him.

"Didn't slow you down much." Johnny Lee smiled.

"What's the story with the judge, then?"

"You'd know better than I would."

"Oh, sure, I know his people. I probably went to his First Communion." Politics and family were notoriously intertwined in northern New Mexico. "I meant, I hadn't heard the disposition of the case."

"Continued, without prejudice."

"Who ruled, and what venue?"

"Judge Vigil, here in Santa Fe."

"Andy Vigil's been dead for thirty-five years."

"His nephew," Johnny Lee said gently.

Benny took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"They'd be using us, of course," Johnny Lee remarked.

Meaning the same plain and simple *they* again. "What's the point, then?"

"Maybe the chance to settle some old scores."

Benny grinned. "Aren't we beyond influence?"

"Judge Maestas is sitting on a land-grant case."

"What, illegal taking? Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, or the sheep farmers that got thrown off the mesa at Los Alamos?"

"You might laugh, but those cases have legal standing."

"They're going to be consolidated, and heard in a federal court, and found without merit. Those old *Norteños* are going to get burned a second time. Poor timing, and damn poor law."

"Heard in a lower court first. The higher courts will rule on procedure, not merits."

"You're saying Judge Maestas is going to call the shots?"

"He may be reversed. He almost certainly will be. But his rulings could go some distance toward defining the case."

"This is all sounding pretty familiar."

"A hundred and fifty years of ill will and bad blood."

"How does it concern us, then?"

"Took you long enough to get around to it," Johnny Lee said. "Would've been my first question."

Benny realized he'd missed a trick. "Which would have?" he asked.

"The judge's passenger."

"I get the feeling I'm not going to like this."

Johnny Lee looked straight at Benny, and fired the last round in his gun. He knew the old man wasn't bulletproof. "Leo Teixeira," he said.

"*Hijo de puta*," Benny muttered, sitting back stunned.

"There it is," Montoya said, but without any apology in his voice.

Benny Salvador was still carrying scar tissue from the courthouse siege. Of course, it wasn't all that long ago. In living memory, certainly, and something they both remembered all too vividly.

"You able to sort out your feelings about this?" Johnny Lee asked, watching his friend's face.

Benny was looking past him. The late morning sun came in through the windows of the cafe. Toward noon, it would thicken, and become oppressive, but just now, it was clear and silvery, dust motes rising in the light. You wanted to stop time, simply for the purity of it. There was no more perfect moment than this, the absolute present. Benny felt his moorings slip, as if he'd stepped through a door, the door into his own history.

It was hot that July morning twenty-odd years before. The weather had been dry all spring. Monsoon season came late—the pattern of afternoon thundershowers that usually begins in the summer—but up north there was little rainfall, and the acequias were down to a trickle. Families watched their kitchen gardens wither, and the green fruit on the apricot trees turned to burnt raisins. In the end, it all came down to water, a long-time bone of contention. But as the saying goes out West, water runs uphill toward money.

There'd been trouble already in the upper Rio Grande valley that year. The river itself was low, runoff from the snowpack in the Colorado Rockies well below normal, and the watershed was exhausted. Smaller creeks had dried up. The arroyos would run sudden and strong in a summer storm, but the storms were few, and once they passed, the water leaked away into the sun-bruised earth. Up along the Chama fork, north of Española, things had gotten worse. Traditional irrigation methods competed with the needs of more industrialized, high-volume users, and there was of course an unfortunate racial component, Anglos owning larger properties in many cases, the Hispanos being small holders—but still *owners*, not sharecroppers. Water rights were historically contested, but in New Mexico, history intrudes all too often on the present. Men carried guns that summer, not just rifles, like a .30-30 Winchester carbine on a rack in the back window of a truck, but sidearms, personal weapons, worn openly in belt holsters. Sin-

gle-action Colts, or war souvenirs brought back from the Pacific, or something your grandfather had used to fight Mexican bandits or Apache raiders. Men who taught school stuck a .45 in their belts. There had been incidents where the release of river water into acequia systems by local growers was argued. The local orchards took first place, by law and by custom, but the bigger growers imported hired muscle to intimidate them. The little guys didn't knuckle under. Once or twice, shots were actually exchanged.

In the wider world, there was a war on, and a presidential campaign underway. Eisenhower was campaigning on a platform that promised to get American GI's out of Korea. His running mate was a young California congressman, now senator, who'd made a name for himself in the Alger Hiss scandal.

But in northern New Mexico, most everybody's concerns that dry, debilitating summer were more parochial and immediate.

Benny Salvador was up at the courthouse in Tierra Amarilla to transport some prisoners back south. Rio Arriba was a big county, from Española, down by Santa Fe, to Dulce and Chama, up near the Colorado line. Tierra Amarilla was the county seat, although the town was no more than a few faded storefronts: hardware, a grocery chain, the local feed-and-grain. Most county business was done in Española, where Benny had his own offices, and the Santa Fe courthouses handled many of the civil cases and most of the criminal ones. Tierra Amarilla, although on paper the seat of government, was a backwater. Benny only went up once a week, if that, but usually delegated the duty to a deputy. He'd happened to pull the detail this week because Jack Bolivar had caught the mumps from one of his kids, and Jack was worried he'd go sterile if he jiggled his testicles. Benny told him to stay on the sofa, signed out a nine-passenger vehicle with a secured rear compartment, and drove up in the morning. He enlisted a deputy named Tiny Trujillo to ride shotgun—literally, since Tiny would be posting a twelve-gauge pump for the trip.

The magistrate in Tierra Amarilla was the Honorable Frederick Noons, known as "No Nonsense" Noons, for his habit of stating he'd tolerate no nonsense in his courtroom. Judge Noons was a man who stood on ceremony, and had a very correct, not to say stuffy, manner. He took himself far too seriously, in the opinion of the people unlucky enough to appear before him—defendants, law officers, and counsel for either side. Benny's hope for a quick remand and a short turnaround, getting back on the road before late morning, to beat the noon heat, was frustrated by Noons' self-importance. It was a routine transfer, the paperwork had all been shuffled already, but the judge insisted that Benny go through the motions, for form's sake, which meant he had to wait for the prisoners to be brought up to the hearing room, and their particulars gone through, before they were released into his custody. And his

presence was demanded. Judge Noons meant to dot every *i* and cross every *t*. Benny went up to the county offices on the second floor to use the phone while a bailiff got the prisoners in shackles and ready for court. The judge wouldn't begin the proceedings until the stroke of ten, not a minute sooner, not a minute later.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," his wife said, exasperated. Teresa had little patience for fools. "You think you'll be here by the middle of next week?"

"I'll be home for supper," Benny said, smiling to himself. He hadn't meant to get her aggravated on his account, but it was somehow comforting that she got steamed about No Nonsense Noons.

"I swear, Benny," Teresa said. He could hear the smile in *her* voice, too. It wasn't as if she'd ever tell him his business or try and talk him out of what he did, but she was persuasive in her own way, without calling his decisions into question. "I wonder sometimes about the will of the voters."

She meant, of course, that Judge Noons was elected to his office, but Benny was only half-listening at this point. He was looking out the window. There seemed to be quite a few people gathering around the building, men parking pickups, the women with picnic baskets and Igloo coolers, as if for fiesta or a holiday. But the men had guns in their rifle racks.

"Teresa, honey, I better get off the phone," Benny said. "Something's going on up here. I don't like the way it looks to be shaping."

"Talk to me, Benny," she said, immediately alert.

"We got a bunch of armed locals, in a group outside. Seems like they have a complaint. Call the state police."

Teresa Salvador had once brought her husband back from the dead, when he'd been ambushed by bandits, and unlike Judge Noons, she was no-nonsense in deed as well as word. She heard the urgency in her husband's voice, but she didn't want to break the connection. "You take care," she whispered.

"I aim to," he said, and hung up. He'd already spotted one of the kids shinnying up a telephone pole to cut the wires.

There was a good-sized crowd by now. It was a disciplined crowd, not a mob, but that was bothersome in itself. By a rough head count, it numbered well over a hundred.

Benny went down the stairs to the ground floor. "Get those men back in their cells," he told the bailiff.

The bailiff looked affronted.

"God damn it," Benny barked, "lock 'em back up."

Nobody was used to Benny raising his voice, and when he did they scurried.

He turned to Tiny Trujillo, his Española deputy. "Find the field of fire where you can do the most damage," he told him.

Deputy Trujillo gaped at him.

"Tiny," Benny said sharply. "If a lawless gang comes boiling through the front door of this courthouse, I want you to be ready for them. Are we clear?"

"Yessir," Tiny said. He'd never seen the sheriff so stern. He'd heard stories, but this sudden iron was scary.

The judge was next. He came out into the corridor dressed in his robes, in high dudgeon, demanding what the sheriff thought he was up to.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Fred," Benny said. "Shuck that God damn undertaker's outfit and get back to your chambers."

Few men in Rio Arriba doubted Benny Salvador when he looked like he meant business. The judge retired to load a pistol.

The court clerk, a sensible woman named Alma Lujan, came up to ask Benny what was going on.

"Better safe than sorry."

"That's no answer at all," she said stoutly.

"Think of it as a fire drill, then, Alma. I believe we have a situation on our hands we should be prepared to fort up for."

"Where do you want us civilians?"

"Under your desks."

"Done," she said.

Benny didn't like being the little boy who cried wolf, but neither did he want to be taken unawares. He got another of the jailers to help him secure the first-floor doors and windows, and he saw as he made his way around the building perimeter that they were in fact surrounded, with enough men outside to make a cordon guarding all the entrances. They showed no sign of criminal intent—their presence was threatening enough. And when he picked up one of the office phones, the line was already dead, as he'd expected.

Benny took stock of the situation. He had himself and his own deputy, two bailiffs who doubled as guards in the jail, and the judge. That was five with guns. Then there was Alma, the judge's staff of one. Benny didn't doubt Alma Lujan could point and shoot most any kind of weapon, if it came to that.

He didn't want it to. He had to find out what this was all about, and defuse the confrontation, if possible, before it even became one. There was probably an easy way and a hard way, but Benny had no idea what the easier alternative was. He shucked his cartridge belt and holstered .44 and handed the rig to Tiny. He wasn't sure he trusted the deputy's judgment. "If anybody shoots at us, you shoot back," he said. "But don't shoot unless you have to defend yourself. These people aren't our enemies."

Tiny looked scared. Benny didn't blame him. "What are you going to do?" Tiny asked hoarsely.

"I'm going outside for a smoke," Benny told him.

Which he did, with no effort to make himself inconspicuous,

shouldering through the big double doors and then stopping at the top of the courthouse steps, head bent, cupping a match to his cigarette. From under the brim of his cowboy hat, Benny surveyed the crowd. Almost two hundred by now, more than half of them men, the men deployed to the front. Benny could have made such an estimate from safe inside the building, but he wanted to see what effect his presence outside might have. In the event, there seemed to be none. Nobody made a hostile move. In fact, Benny realized, nobody had even stepped off the sidewalk yet, onto the courthouse lawn, say, which made it hard to bring a case for civil insurrection when citizens were simply gathering peaceably on the pavement.

Then again, these were citizens with guns. There wasn't a man facing Benny who wasn't armed, although they carried their weapons over their shoulders or pointing at the ground. Of course, he knew more than a few of them, too, but none of the men he recognized avoided his eyes, or seemed embarrassed to be seen there. One or two even smiled slightly, and nodded in his direction. Which didn't soften the charged atmosphere. If anything, it made Benny more watchful. These guys were here in broad daylight, and they weren't bashful about it. Some of them had brought families along, but Benny didn't think that was a mitigating factor. The reverse, in fact. No one wants to look less a man in front of his wife and children. It meant these people were determined, betting on this one throw of the dice.

For *what*, though? Benny wondered. No harm in asking. He took a step down and the man directly across from him, ten feet away, gave him the barest negative shake of his head. Benny took the hint, although he didn't acknowledge it. He glanced around idly, dropped his cigarette on the steps, grinding it out under his boot, and went back inside.

Judge Noons was waiting for him in the corridor. "What's going on out there, Sheriff?" the judge demanded. "I don't like being bottled up in my own courthouse."

Benny took his gun belt back from Tiny and buckled it on.

The judge swallowed his choler, which was only bluster to cover his anxiety. "You know the phones are down," he said in a quieter tone of voice.

Benny didn't bother to acknowledge the obvious.

"Are they going to rush us?" his deputy asked.

"They're waiting for something," Benny said. "Or somebody. A signal, maybe. If not a sign." He said this last without irony. Judge Noons gave him a funny look. "I was on the phone with my wife when I saw the crowd forming up outside," Benny told the judge. "Just before the lines were cut. By now, she's already made a call to the state police."

"How long, you think?" the judge asked him.

Benny shook his head. "Depends," he said. "Montoya's a good man, but his people don't have wings. No matter how fast he gets any troopers rolling, we're sixty miles from the nearest barracks. Those boys are spread thin on the ground."

This was no more than plain truth, New Mexico's state agencies being both underfunded and undermanned. They were just going to have to sit tight. At best, help was an hour away.

The judge asked Benny a surprisingly acute question. At least, it surprised Benny, and he was mildly irritated that he hadn't thought of it before: What about the prisoners in lockdown, was one of them the cause?

"Doesn't look like a lynch mob," Benny said.

Judge Noons went and fetched the paperwork from Alma, his clerk, and rehearsed the charges against the men in custody. None of it seemed like something you'd want to spring a man for, either. It was the usual: battery, trespass, lewd behavior, public drunkenness. Mostly nuisance offenses. There was one manslaughter, not that uncommon, mixed in with the rest. Benny saw what the judge was getting at, though. It made sense that the men outside were there to remedy an injustice. But neither he nor the judge would give up a prisoner, whether it saved their own skins or not, particularly if it might save their own skins. You didn't stand for a principle merely when it was comfortable. In this, the sheriff and the judge were of one mind. Maybe he had too exalted an idea of his own importance, but the judge was no coward, even if he was occasionally a ninny.

"That's not it," Benny said.

"No, probably not," the judge agreed.

"Benny," Tiny Trujillo called from a front window.

They went to see what was up.

A panel truck had pulled up on the opposite side of the street, and people were busy around it. A dry goods store across from the courthouse had been persuaded to let the truck's technicians run its equipment off the local electrical service.

"I'll be jiggered," Benny remarked.

The logo stenciled in capitals on the side of the panel truck was KCDR-AM, the frequency listed underneath, and as Benny watched, an announcer got down out of the truck and began testing his microphone. Benny turned to Alma and asked her to find a radio they could plug in somewhere. The phones were dead but the power wasn't cut off.

"What the heck is happening?" Tiny Trujillo asked.

"We're about to be in front of a statewide audience," Benny said.

"That truck can relay the signal."

The judge girded up his loins. "I should go out there," he said to Benny. "They wouldn't dare stop me, now."

"Getting you to sound off on the radio is close to the best thing

they could hope for, Fred,” Benny said.

“I have the feeling you’re a step or two ahead of me,” Fred Noons said. “What’s your sense of this?”

“We’re trapped in here, and can’t expect anybody to show before midday, at the soonest,” Benny said. “How come the radio people knew something was going on?”

His reasoning was too sophisticated for Tiny to follow, but Fred Noons saw. “They were tipped off in advance,” he said.

Benny nodded. “Somebody scheduled the time and the place,” he agreed. “Along with the promise of a big story.”

“So now the curtain goes up,” the judge said.

Benny checked his watch. “I’d imagine we are about to see an entrance,” he said.

As indeed they were.

It was a convoy of three vehicles, two pickups for security, the first riding point, the other riding drag, with armed men standing in the truck beds, bracing themselves against the cabs of the trucks, their eyes hard and inquiring, sweeping the immediate perimeter. Benny almost laughed aloud, they were taking themselves with such gravity, play-acting at being serious muscle, and they were completely exposed. It was all for show. A professional shooter could have taken out the primary target, shot five or six others just to create a panic, and faded away without consequence. Maybe that was wishful thinking. Benny was remembering a remark he’d once heard, or read, that if the Roman garrison in Judea had quietly arranged for the assassination of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, any number of subsequent difficulties could have been avoided. He knew this was cynical, and possibly blasphemous. On the other hand, the crowd ringing the courthouse could well have been strewing rushes before the approaching caravan. And the man standing in the stake-sided truck that rode in the middle was upright and alone, no guards flanking him. He accepted the benediction as his right, nodding to his flock, smiling, gentle as the Lamb of God.

“It’s the Second Coming, all over again,” Judge Noons said bitterly, but nevertheless almost admiringly.

Benny wanted to puke. He glanced at Tiny. The deputy looked as if he’d been hit in the forehead with a length of two-by-four. Benny relieved him of the shotgun. “Go to the toilet,” Benny said sharply. “Splash some cold water on your face and come back here ready to do your damn job.”

Tiny hopped to it, startled by the sheriff’s vehemence, but grateful all the same that he’d been reminded what was what.

“Leo Teixeira,” the judge said.

Benny had no notion of laughing now. He’d known already who the man riding in the stake-sided truck was. The crowd had told him. He’d never met Teixeira, but he knew him by name, and rep-

utation. He was a hard-shell Baptist preacher from Texas—Hispanic, but not, curiously, a Catholic—who'd fired up the *Norteño* farmers with the historic injustices done them over water rights. The newspapers in Albuquerque and Santa Fe had taken to calling him the Lion of the Chama, and his movement had appropriated the motto *Tierra o Muerte*: Land or Death.

"Things are going from bad to worse," Benny said to Noons.

The judge turned away from the windows and went back to his chambers without saying anything. He seemed more rattled than he let on, to Benny's way of thinking, but Benny hoped he'd pull himself together. Steadiness was called for now.

Tiny seemed more composed, anyway, after his trip to the men's room. Benny gave him back the pump gun. "You all right?"

Tiny nodded, a little shamefaced.

"Just try and keep your thoughts in a straight line," Benny told him. Easy enough to say.

Alma brought a battered Bakelite radio into the room and found an outlet. Benny told her which station to look for. She adjusted the dial until she'd pulled in a signal, and then fiddled with a length of coat hanger that served as the antenna.

"—TEN-THIRTY IN THE MORNING HERE OUTSIDE THE RIO ARRIBA COUNTY COURTHOUSE IN TIERRA AMARILLA, WHERE WE ARE BROADCASTING LIVE. A SIZABLE CROWD HAS COME TOGETHER THIS MORNING, UNDER THE BANNER OF THE *ALIANZA*, AND WE ARE NOW WATCHING THEIR LEADER, LEO TEIXEIRA, THE LION OF THE CHAMA, ARRIVING TO CHEERS—"

Benny heard glass break somewhere in the building, and then the gunshot. Inside, it was a sharp crack. On the radio, it was only a pop, carried by the announcer's microphone. Benny hit the deck.

It was much argued afterwards, but Benny Salvador always knew that first shot had been fired by Judge Noons. Whether he meant to hit anybody was unlikely. He'd simply panicked. Maybe it was supposed to be a warning shot, over the heads of the crowd. Or he might actually have been shooting at Leo Teixeira, but he just wasn't good enough with a handgun. In any case, the shot went wide, but the return fire was immediate.

Benny felt as if he were inside an oil drum being hammered with baseball bats. He'd been in shootouts before, but they'd been face-to-face, or running gunfights, firing and then looking for better cover. This was what he imagined wartime combat to be like, an enormous, constant crash of noise, no individual reports from the rifles outside, and a blistering ozone in the air, shattered by shock waves, and the vacuum that followed bullet hits, sucking the sound after them. The windows blew in, the fragments like dust, cutting his hands and his exposed forearms, which he'd

thrown over his head. Furniture splintered and exploded. Books burst. Plaster disintegrated. The whole courthouse seemed to vibrate, as though some grinding pitch had been struck on a tuning fork, and the bricks were loosening like bad teeth. Then it stopped, as abruptly as it started.

There was a voice of authority outside, calling the men to order. Benny imagined it was Leo Teixeira. He picked himself up off the floor. His arms tingled, from hundreds of tiny abrasive cuts, as if his skin had been sandpapered. He wasn't bleeding much. It was more like acne. He wanted to scratch, but he knew there were glass particles as fine as pumice imbedded in the cuts. He needed to run the cuts under a rush of scalding-hot water.

He looked over at Alma Lujan. She was cowering against the wall. The radio she'd brought in was a mess of broken plastic and fizzing wires, but Alma was physically unhurt. Her eyes, though, were wide and terrified. Benny moved to comfort her and she shrank from his touch. He glanced toward Tiny. The deputy was in a crouch near the door, gripping the shotgun with both hands, by the forestock. His face was grey and shocked. At least he didn't look eager to use the gun, Benny thought. He looked more ready to throw it away and run.

"You in the jail," somebody called from the street. They'd gotten hold of a bullhorn.

"Alma," Benny whispered.

Her look was glazed and heavy-lidded.

"Alma," he said more sharply.

Her eyes focused on him.

Benny tipped his head toward the window. "Answer back," he told her. Alma, of course, had no idea what she was supposed to say, but Benny was already crawling away across the floor on his elbows and knees, making for the doorway into the corridor.

"Nobody was meant to get hurt," the voice outside called.

"Then stop shooting at us," Alma called back. She realized Benny wanted her to buy him some time.

Benny, meanwhile, slithered through the door and crawled across the hall into the offices opposite. The judge's chambers were at the back of this suite, a small corner study with a second, separate access to the courtroom proper. Benny picked his way through the debris, keeping down, his profile well below the level of the window sills. He heard the man on the bullhorn making them a surrender offer, but he didn't hear what Alma told him in reply. She sounded more assertive, though.

The door to Fred Noons' private office was ajar. Benny peered cautiously around the jamb, not wanting to take a bullet from the judge by accident. Fred was curled up against the wall, between the broken corner windows, his shoulders hunched and his knees drawn up to his chest. His wrists were braced across his knees,

holding the pistol rigidly out in front of him with both hands. His expression was staring and sightless.

"Fred, it's me," Benny said softly, but in a normal tone of voice. He didn't want to startle the man. "Rubén Salvador."

"Benny?" the judge asked, cocking his head.

"That's right," Benny said. "You okay?"

"I can't see," the judge whispered.

Jesus, Benny thought. He crept across the floor, glass fragments crunching underfoot, and crouched next to Noons. "You hit, Fred?" he asked him.

"I don't know," the judge said.

Benny looked at the gun Judge Noons was holding. It was a Smith hand-ejector, a .32 with the hammer cocked, and the judge had his index finger inside the trigger guard. "I'm taking the gun, Fred," Benny told him. He put his palm across the cylinder and backstrap, wedging his thumb between the firing pin and the frame, for safety's sake. The judge wouldn't let go. It was like trying to get the gun out of a dead man's grip, after rigor mortis has set in. The judge's hands were set stiff as cement. "Easy does it, Fred," Benny said. "The shooting's over and done with." The judge relaxed enough for Benny to get the gun loose and lower the hammer. Benny sat back on his heels. He passed a hand in front of the judge's eyes. Noons didn't blink.

"I don't feel any pain," the judge said, his voice sounding distant.

Benny couldn't see any evidence the judge had been wounded. Maybe it was a kind of hysterical blindness. Benny had heard of this happening to soldiers under fire, during the war, something in their nervous systems shutting down.

"Stay with me, Benny," the judge said.

Benny would have been anxious himself, but then he understood it wasn't the fear of further injury he'd heard in the other man's words so much as his fear of being left alone. "I won't be far, Fred," he told Noons.

The judge nodded, accepting a simple truth: Benny couldn't have stayed if he wanted to. He was responsible for the rest of their people trapped inside the building, as well.

Benny duck-walked out of the judge's chambers, made his way back across the clerk's area to the corridor, and started down the hallway toward the basement stairs. Negotiations were still going on, apparently, Alma stalling, the guy on the bullhorn sounding patient enough. Why shouldn't he? Benny thought. The men outside were holding all the cards. He got to the head of the stairs and called down, not showing himself. He didn't feature getting his head blown off if one of the bailiffs had a nervous disposition.

"That you, Sheriff?" one of the turnkeys called back.

"How you boys holding out?" Benny asked.

"Got grub, drinking water, and a twelve-gauge," the turnkey

answered him. "Prisoners hunkered down in the holding tank."

"Don't go cutting loose with that shotgun, now," Benny told him. "Just wait for my instructions."

"What's happening, Benny?" the second bailiff called up the stairwell. "Sounds like the Battle of the Bulge."

"You there, Xavier?" Benny called down, smiling.

"Hell no," the bailiff called back. "And I didn't join up with no Hunnert-n-First Airborne for this here, neither."

"Sit tight," Benny advised them.

He worked back up the hallway toward the front of the courthouse, keeping close to the wall. If there was going to be any more gunfire, plaster and lath might slow a bullet.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," Alma said, when he ducked into the room. "I'm about wore out."

"You did good, Alma," Benny told her. He glanced at Tiny.

The deputy had shrunk back even further, collapsing into himself like a heap of old laundry, which was some trick, considering that he weighed some three hundred pounds, "Tiny" being one of those nicknames you get saddled with in grade school. At least he still had hold of his weapon, and he had it across his body, in a position where he might make use of it.

"Where we at, Alma?" Benny asked her. He scrunched over in Tiny's direction.

"They want to speak to somebody in authority, which I guess would be you, Benny," she said. "How's the judge?"

"Good as could be expected," Benny said, but he saw the look she gave him and knew he had to tell her. "He's gone blind, Alma. It's only temporary, I think. Some kind of shell shock. I hesitate to ask, but, truth be told, somebody ought to be with him."

"You take his gun away?" she asked.

Benny nodded. "I put it out of reach," he said. "Don't be picking it up yourself, now."

"I'm loyal, Sheriff," she said. "I'm not foolhardy." She was moving toward the door on her hands and knees, not trying to salvage her already torn stockings.

"Stay low," Benny said.

"I'm learning," she said, grinning back over her shoulder.

Women often had more presence of mind than men, Benny decided. Here was Tiny Trujillo, a shapeless lump of lard, and Alma Lujan was crawling out under possible fire to help the man she'd worked for—and maybe didn't even respect that much—because she felt he didn't deserve to be by himself in an hour of need.

"Señora?" the voice outside inquired. He'd put down the bullhorn. His tone was more intimate. Not seductive, not in a sexual way, but intrusive.

Aw, hell, Benny thought. He took the pump gun away from Tiny

and edged over underneath the window. "You're talking, I'm listening," he called out.

"Who am I talking to?" the man asked.

"This is Rubén Salvador, sheriff of Rio Arriba County."

"Benny Salvador? I'm honored. You're a man of no small reputation, and a man people can respect. With respect, then, I suggest you give up what's become an impossible position."

"Who am I talking to?" Benny called.

"I'm the Reverend Leo Teixeira, a follower, not a leader, a pastor to my sheep."

Sheep to be sheared, Benny thought, *you wily, opportunistic bastard*, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Benny, can we deal?" Teixeira asked him.

There was little point in discussing incitement to riot, Benny knew, and he knew there was a timetable here, too. They weren't going to wait for the state police or the National Guard to show up. "What do you want?" he called.

"A bargain," Teixeira said. "For justice."

He was playing to the crowd, Benny realized. "What terms?" he called back.

"Give us Judge Noons."

"The judge needs medical attention."

There was a moment's pause. "He brought it on himself," Leo Teixeira said, after a space. "I'm sorry for his injuries."

"What's the injury done *you*, Reverend?" Benny called.

"You're playing for time, Sheriff. But time's running out. Give us an answer."

Or take the consequences, which went unsaid. Benny could only imagine. Actually, looking at the ruined office furniture, he didn't have to. He stood up, showing himself in the window to the riflemen outside. He raised Tiny's shotgun across his chest, slow and careful, keeping the muzzle up, and worked the slide, jacking the shells out, one, two, three, four, until the action locked up, and then he tossed the empty pump gun out through the broken sash onto the grass. He turned away from the window.

There was collective relief at this sign of defeat. People outside were almost ready to smile at one another.

Leaning down toward Tiny, as if pausing to tie his shoes, Benny murmured, "Get the judge and Alma down to the holding cells with Xavier and the other bailiff. Don't give him up, or any of the prisoners." Benny straightened up. He unbuckled his .44 and walked out. Tiny stared after him.

Benny Salvador stepped out onto the courthouse steps with his arms spread wide. His gunbelt was dangling from his left hand, signaling surrender. Benny wasn't foolish enough to think he could pull this off on his own hook. It wasn't *his* reputation he was

counting on. He was counting on the sense of self-importance Leo Teixeira had. "Judge Noons is a wounded man," Benny told the crowd. "Wounded physically, and wounded in spirit. I am not."

His audience swayed forward, and then back, hanging fire.

"Why take damaged goods?" Benny demanded, directing himself at Leo Teixeira, but everybody there heard him.

They paused, and regathered, catching their breath.

"Take me," Benny said to them. "I'm whole." He lowered his voice, and they leaned in to hear it. "I stand hostage for your grievance." He looked defiantly at Teixeira. "Take *me*, in exchange." And he walked forward into the waiting disorder.

East of the Rio Chama were the San Juan mountains. The northern tier of the San Juans was national forest, and the Cruces Basin Wilderness. To the south was a large pocket of steep, heavily wooded slopes, piñon and juniper lower down, aspen, fir, and ponderosa pine at higher elevations, the country cut by ravines. The population was scattered, mostly gathered in small hill towns like Las Tablas, Petaca, Vallecitos—places large enough for a village church, a rural post office, and the occasional homegrown commercial enterprise, like a hairdresser, or a lumberyard, or an open-air auto-body shop. Much of the area was simply wild and inaccessible. The locals called it El Rincón, The Corner, but the name was meant to be ironic, since this little corner took in some sixteen hundred square miles, and few people, even those native-born, knew the whole of it well.

This was where they brought Benny Salvador.

They were treating him pretty rough. Like a prisoner, not a guest. But they were a rough bunch, the men who had charge of him. Teixeira had given Benny over to a core group, hard cases Benny could only characterize as enforcers, like Hitler's brownshirts. They were landless men, for the most part, drawn to the *Alianza* not out of principle, but for opportunity. They had their uses to Leo Teixeira, Benny understood. They were the *Alianza's* shock troops, which gave them sanction to be bullies. Benny recognized the type. Many, if not all, had been in previous trouble with the law, and their records would include domestic violence, at a guess, because they were of a piece, he knew, from a class one step above peonage, without prospects, the cards stacked against them, led by brutish lives into a brutish nature. They took their sullen resentments out on their families, or whoever was closest. In this case, that was Benny.

They were holed up in the Cañada del Oso. The campsite was rude and temporary, the access a disused logging track. One of the trucks had broken an axle on the way in. Benny, given a shove and a curse, had stumbled into place to help push it off the road. They'd taken off his leg shackles for this duty, but not the cuffs. They never did. The handcuffs were good, too, not cheap die-cast, but regular

police issue, carbon steel, made by Smith & Wesson. The *cañada* was deep in the Rincón, in thick woods, and true to its name, you heard bear crashing through the brush at night, although they avoided the camp. Whitetail and mule deer, bighorn sheep, wild turkey, all manner of smaller varmints, Benny figured, out for forage, and maybe even cougar, although to his knowledge their range was further south, down in the Ladrón and the Hatchets. The last of the big cats known to be taken in *el Norte* had been killed in the late forties. The animal was displayed in the lobby of the Lew Wallace Building in Santa Fe, with the .405 Winchester used to shoot it.

It was late Thursday afternoon that he'd been brought into the Rincón, and on the morning of the second day, Saturday, word came that Leo Teixeira was in the custody of the state police. Although it wasn't clear whether he'd surrendered of his own accord, or been captured at gunpoint, it was obvious to Benny that the men who held *him* took it for betrayal, either way, and his worst apprehensions were realized when, after a short, angry discussion among themselves, they decided to hang him.

If they expected him to plead for his life, they'd mistaken their man. Benny wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. It wasn't bravado. He was simply stubborn. After all, he knew dying at the end of a rope was unpleasant and humiliating. It wasn't quick, either, if you were unlucky enough to fall into the hands of inexperienced people. A professional at least knew to measure the drop, so your neck broke cleanly. This crowd would just throw a loop over a branch and haul him up, and watch him strangle and kick and soil himself. And make fun of him while it dragged on, the more drawn-out the better, for the sport of it. He wasn't looking forward to the experience, but he wasn't being given a choice. He figured it made for no great handicap to show courage, then, in front of cowards.

They hadn't put a lot of thought into it. Benny wasn't sure whether to be grateful or not. Maybe the sooner they got it over with, the easier it would be. They backed one of the trucks up under a big *ponderosa* and then heaved him to his feet, hauling him over to the truck and manhandling him up onto the bed. It wasn't easy getting the rope over a branch. The lowest one was thirty feet off the ground. Somebody finally had the bright idea to tie a chunk of deadfall to the rope, to give it ballast, and swung it around a couple of times, picking up momentum, before he let fly. He got it over the branch on the third try. Grinning at Benny, he caught the knotted end of the rope and untied the piece of wood. He made a loop, securing it with a double half hitch, so it wouldn't loosen, and then he snagged it over Benny's head, tugging it tight around his neck. Benny felt the knot just behind his right ear. It was good stout rope, flaxen or hemp fiber, not nylon, which might stretch with his weight. The coarse warp scratched his skin.

"Any last words?" the rope-tosser asked, still grinning. He didn't even know their names, Benny realized.

"Tough guy, *que no?*"

"Hell, he's going to piss himself soon enough, anyway," one of the others said. They all laughed.

A hawk caught the updraft over the canyon, side-slipping on thin air. Benny watched the bird, following it with his eyes, not moving his head. He took a slow, deep breath, putting this vermin out of his mind, studying only on the hawk, a predator in its own place, of a piece with it, feathering the wind, hunting mice or rabbits below. There was only this absolute present. He didn't think about his wife, or his many regrets. He saw the hawk, and willed his heart to leap toward it.

"Let 'er buck," the rope-tosser called. He jumped down off the truck bed.

Benny felt the truck vibrate under his feet. The driver put it in gear, and popped the clutch. Benny watched the hawk. The truck jerked out from under him, and he was suddenly hitched by the throat, the rope sawing at his neck. He snatched his cuffed hands up against his body, involuntarily. His legs were free-wheeling, his chest tight. His eyes pinched shut, although he wanted desperately to stay alert, to still see the hawk, for his spirit to soar after it. He didn't want to shame himself. The blood beat against his temples. He reached out for the bird in his mind's eye, and then even his mind's eye darkened.

Gasping, his own breathing hurt his throat, sawing at his wind-pipe. His lungs ached, but he was sucking in air. The noose had slipped. He'd been reprieved from death, although it took more than a moment for Benny to realize that he was lying on the ground, still cuffed, the rope still around his neck, and the men around him still laughing at the joke. It was a staged hanging, after all. They got him to his feet. Benny gazed into the sky for the hawk, but it was gone. He sensed a loss.

He should have known it was just a sadistic gag. Even these primitives understood he was more use to them alive, for the moment, at least. But he knew, too, that Johnny Lee Montoya would never trade Leo Teixeira. And once that message was delivered, publicly, tomorrow or the day after, Benny would have outlived his usefulness as a hostage.

"Cat got your tongue, Sheriff?" the rope-thrower asked, his tone mocking.

It would be a full twenty-four hours before Benny would be able to speak again in anything above a raspy whisper. He studied the faces of the gang around him. There were nine of them. He'd take the time to learn their names, now, he decided, one by one. Benny wasn't going to kill nameless men.



The one who'd thrown the rope was Eliseo. He came from Mora, a town of no more than twelve hundred people, south of Taos, on the east slope of the Sangres. Like many of the disaffected and disenfranchised, Eliseo Chavez was a man victimized by his own resentments. He took everything personally, but if fate had decreed him to be one of life's losers, then he was absolved of his own responsibility for it. It was a mentality that Benny found generic to most criminals, large or petty, a detachment from the common social compact. Hard work got you nowhere, self-discipline was for suckers, only a fool played by the rules, since the rules, after all, had been invented as a labyrinth of obstacles, and people who believed in them were all rats in a maze. You didn't *get* what you deserved, you *took* it.

Eliseo got what he deserved by the streambed, a hundred yards from camp. Benny had needed to answer a call of nature—so he said—and Eliseo was dispatched as his chaperone. They were masked by the trees. Benny held out his hands, but Eliseo refused to unlock the cuffs. Benny shrugged, and awkwardly loosened his pants. Eliseo turned his back and lit a cigarette, a pretend courtesy. Benny took three short steps, and had him from behind. The handcuffs were all too effective. Benny snapped the chain between his wrists around Eliseo's throat, right to left, to give him leverage, his forearms crossed at the base of Eliseo's skull, the links jerked tight. Eliseo thrashed, but he was unable to cry out. Benny pushed him forward and got his knee in the other man's back, jamming Eliseo face-first into the dirt. It takes a lot longer than you think to choke someone to death, even with the trachea crushed. Benny sat on the man's shoulderblades until it was finally over.

He turned the dead man on his back (funny how the dead were heavier, somehow, or simply more unwieldy than the living) and fished through his pockets. Eliseo had a set of keys to the handcuffs, but no weapon other than a folding Buck knife with a four-inch blade. Benny unlocked the cuffs and stuck the knife in his back pocket. Rubbing his chafed wrists, chewed raw from the struggle with Eliseo, Benny circled through the woods. A little down the *cañada* from camp there was a sentry posted on the road. Each of the men took a two-hour watch. Benny figured to eliminate the man on duty and then ambush his relief.

Which was done soon enough, briskly and without fuss. He used the knife on both of them. The sentry was carrying a handgun, a .38-40 single action, five rounds in the cylinder, an empty chamber under the hammer. The second man had a flatside lever gun, with a box magazine that held four .30-03 cartridges. Benny felt fairly well-equipped, considering.

Two men had driven out in the late morning, over to Las Tablas for supplies, beer and cigarettes, mostly. The town was some six or

eight miles away, over corduroy roads. Benny didn't expect them back before noon. That left four to deal with.

The road into the *cañada* narrowed and took a dogleg just before the clearing opened up where the campsite had been established. Benny crouched in the underbrush at the bend in the road, waiting for the men to gather in one place. Peso Quiñones was tending a fire in a circle of rocks. He had a pot of cowboy coffee on the fire, the grounds measured into boiling water, settling as the coffee cooled. Peso was an affable-seeming sort who'd delegated to himself the cooking chores, but he was, in fact, the hardest man of the bunch, a stone killer who'd served time in West Texas for mayhem. Leo Teixeira had gone his parole, and brought Peso with him to New Mexico as a regulator. Benny intended no quarter for Peso.

The other three weren't much better. None of them were farm boys led astray by the *Alianza's* promise of fair play. The best that could be said of them was that they took money for the job they did, at least, instead of doing it for pleasure.

The other men came up to the campfire, reaching for metal cups. Benny wanted them all together, and now was as good a time as any. He rose to his feet and stepped out of the brush. He had a round chambered in the .30-03 and the hammer back. The revolver was in his waistband, although Benny's hands were so cramped he had little confidence he could draw, cock, and shoot if he had to, not with any facility. He was forty feet away before one of the men at the fire looked up and took notice of him, and even then he didn't react soon enough. It was Peso who moved the quickest, as Benny expected, Peso who swiveled without getting to his feet, using the man closest to him as cover, pulling a .45 auto pistol from the small of his back and getting off a snap shot. Benny shot the man standing in front of Peso in the chest, a hip shot, and levered the .30-03, going down on one knee. Peso had time to use a two-handed grip, steadying the handgun. Benny put a bullet in his face, snapping his head back, and Peso's brains hissed on the hot stones. Benny levered another round, calm as Death, gut-shot the next man, folding him over like a stunned cow at the slaughterhouse, and when the last of them turned and made to run, Benny put the fourth shot square in his back, shattering the man's spine and slamming him forward into the dirt.

Benny got up slowly, trembling. He'd seen and done some savage business in his time, but he'd never done anything like this. He may have been justified, but he'd put himself outside legal remedy, he knew. And yet he was elated. Later, he might be sick at heart, and later he *was*, but here in the bloody clearing, he felt the surge of triumph. Three dead, the fourth bleeding out as Benny stood there. He went over to the man he'd gut-shot. His name was Martín, Benny had learned earlier. Martín had no eyes for Benny.

He was focused on something too close for Benny to see. Martín had his hands clutched to his abdomen, his knees drawn up, and he kept up a steady keening, almost subvocal, unable to stop, rocking back and forth against the pain. His face was a mask of sweat, leaking across his skin like tears. Benny knew what was necessary, and he did it, cocking the single action with both hands, stiffly, his grip still uncertain, and shot Martín in the head. He trusted Martín was grateful for this small mercy.

Benny dragged the dead men into the woods and patted them down for weapons and ammo. There were .30-03 cartridges, and he reloaded the lever gun, putting the spare rounds in his pocket.

He still had four shots in the single action. He sat down at the campfire to wait for the last two to come back from Las Tablas. It gave him too much time to think. Thinking, he knew, was best avoided for the moment.

Leo Teixeira came to trial in the fall. It was a charged proceeding, demonstrators on the sidewalks outside the district court in Santa Fe, newspaper editorials decrying his actions but supporting his aims, the governor himself making ill-advised statements in support of the defendant. In short, it was a circus, political in the worst sense, meaning that nobody had transparent motives. It was an election issue. Benny, called as a witness, gave testimony pertaining to the courthouse siege itself. Since he was never asked on direct about what had happened in the Rincón, defense couldn't cross-examine. Eight men dead, one left alive to testify against Teixeira. Benny had brought him in breathing, if not unharmed.

And how did that happen? defense counsel asked the witness.

We was dry-gulched, the witness told him.

Come again?

"At the bend in the road," Brian Rojas explained. "He was laying for us." Brian was the last of the nine. He'd gone into Las Tablas that morning with Iago Escondido, known more familiarly as Jimmy. "Jimmy, he stands on the brakes and the truck slews around. John Law, he don't bat an eyelash. Jimmy, he kind of falls out of the truck, and John Law shoots him stone dead."

"Jimmy was unarmed?"

No, it developed, he was fumbling with his gun.

Defense tried a little coaching. "He was trying to discard his weapon and surrender?"

The witness squirmed, uncomfortable. He'd already admitted Jimmy Escondido was trying to shoot the sheriff.

What did the witness do next?

"I was scrunched down behind the dashboard. Looking to be invisible. Sheriff hollers at me to come out, but I was afeared he meant to gun me, which he did."

"You're saying Sheriff Salvador shot you while you cowered, terrified, inside the truck?"

"Shot my damn ear off," Rojas said. "Told me he'd shoot my *cojones* off, next."

There was more in this vein, attempting to paint Benny as a loose cannon, bent on revenge for evil treatment, but it all came to nothing. The problem being that said evil treatment was inarguable, once Rojas admitted they'd strung Benny up, and then let him dangle for a while. The witness discredited himself.

But the D.A. chose not to open this can of worms. Benny Salvador had been held hostage by a gang of outlaws, and he'd done whatever he had to in order to escape. It was common knowledge outside the courtroom that Benny had taken extreme measures, but this was beside the matter at hand. The charge against Leo Teixeira was conspiracy to commit civil insurrection and inciting riot. Benny Salvador wasn't on trial.

In the end, though, Teixeira won acquittal. It would have been hard to find a jury pool in northern New Mexico that didn't have some sympathy with his avowed object, fairness to people who'd been screwed out of their rights, and in plain fact, the case against him wasn't provable. The men who'd held Benny were guilty of excess, certainly, but Leo hadn't ordered a lynching. Who had fired the first shot at Tierra Amarilla? Leo might have provoked a showdown, but none of his had pulled the trigger.

The verdict was clouded, true. *Norteños* felt vindicated, if somewhat embarrassed by their champion. Others felt cheated. Then an unexpected twist changed the dynamic.

Leo Teixeira came out of court a hero to many, if a demon to others. Benny Salvador came out of it an even more ambiguous figure, equally lionized and vilified, but in private, as if people were ashamed to admit their sympathies, that they'd found fault with him, or were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But here we are on the steps of the courthouse after the acquittal, in the moment of vindication itself, Leo Teixeira swarmed by radio people and the newspapers, all of them eager for a juicy quote, waiting for him to slip the knife out of the sheath of magnanimity, and off to one side, Benny Salvador is making a quiet exit. It's a paradigm, and a sharp reporter from an Albuquerque paper sees the possibility. It's only a happy accident that this reporter is approaching Benny when the thing happens. The reporter makes the short list for the Pulitzer, but loses to a bigger story. He's beat out by the San Francisco *Chronicle* and the Providence *Journal*, inexplicably.

Benny is shaking off well-wishers, critics, anybody and everybody who's second-guessing the jury. A middle-aged woman comes up to him, working class, dressed as if for church, not an immediate threat. Her name, it turns out later, is Amelia Chavez. Eliseo was

her brother's son. She has a small-caliber pistol in her handbag, a .22 or a .25, nobody's clear about it until afterwards, and when she gets close enough to be sure, she shoots it through her purse. She shoots the gun eleven times, until it locks back, empty. The small rounds flatten out on impact, chipping off the granite stairs. Miraculously, they hit no innocents. Amélia has only one target in mind.

Two of her shots clip Benny. Left arm, lower left side.

He felt as if he'd been hit in the elbow with a steel pipe, and then his ribs seemed to collapse. He was still too startled to realize he'd been shot. He sank to his knees, all the breath punched out of his lungs. He felt curiously removed, afloat.

He noticed a hawk, high overhead, drifting on the still air like a leaf.

Here's the most curious thing of all. You might imagine Leo Teixeira's influence would snowball, that some years later, with the advent of television, he'd be a presence on UHF (cable is a good while in the future), talking up his peculiar brand of Fundamentalism, mixed in with an appeal to the earthy, local discontent, always simmering. But in fact he became marginal, a lost and trivial figure.

Benny, on the other hand, went from strength to strength. Schoolchildren sent handwritten cards to the hospital. The state legislature voted a commendation. After he'd recovered, even the governor, sensing a shift in the political fault lines, away from sympathy to Teixeira, sent his congratulations.

Benny's career was made. When he chose not to run again for office, many people were baffled, but Johnny Lee Montoya, a captain in the state police by this point, wasn't among them.

And of course Benny had told his wife Teresa his reasons.

That was then. This is the present.

Now, nearly twenty-five years later. A traffic stop. The past brought back like the ache in his chest, the bullet that broke a rib.

Benny drove up to Tierra Amarilla in late afternoon. The war in southeast Asia was on the radio. The big song on the playlist was "A Whiter Shade of Pale." He parked across from the courthouse. You could still see bullet holes in the stucco. Rio Arriba was waiting for federal grant money to help with repairs. They'd wait another twenty-five years, Benny imagined.

Judge Maestas down in Santa Fe, sitting on the land-grant case, had recused himself. The drunk-driving charge would blow away, Benny knew. The voters were forgiving. So it wasn't that. It was Teixeira. Nobody had adequately explained what he was doing in the judge's car that night. In fact, Leo's being there compromised the judge. Benny turned around and headed out of town, watching for the turn as he drove south.

Just off the highway, on a dirt road, was Piedras. It was a small

village, very small, and a small step back in time. There was a church, and a cluster of adobe houses, well kept up. Orchards along the acequia. Kitchen gardens. A few privies.

Benny parked, and stepped out of his car, and went into the little adobe church.

It had that peculiar smell of New Mexican rural churches, both mildewed and dry. He found his way to the sacristy. Like many village churches, there was no pastor. The priest came every Sunday, and on feast days, serving half a dozen local parishes. Church members volunteered their time to pick up the slack, cleaning and routine maintenance, sexton's duties. There were two women in the sacristy, ironing and folding vestments. Benny took them for mother and daughter. The resemblance was in the quick, birdlike economy of their movements.

He explained his errand. When he mentioned Leo Teixeira's name, both women regarded him with a suspicion close to outright hostility. They were being protective, Benny saw. Were they guarding their own privacy, resentful of his intrusion into the settled life of this place, or were they protecting Leo Teixeira in his exile? It didn't have to be one or the other, he knew. Teixeira might be an outcast even here, in his chosen refuge, but if he drew unwelcome attention from someone of Benny's stripe, these people would close ranks, out of the same fixed loyalties to community, tradition, family. Benny was as much a stranger to them as a man from Bombay or Borneo. And yet.

He sensed something else. A warning, perhaps. A danger he hadn't anticipated. What did they suppose he risked by coming here? Benny didn't get it, but he felt a presence, premonitory. He shook it off. He'd already made up his mind beforehand.

Grudgingly, they gave him directions.

He left his car by the church. It was only a short walk, he calculated. Up the dry riverbed a quarter-mile was a clutch of piñon, their roots exposed where the bank had washed out, and from there he should spot the house, off by itself, on a rise.

The sun was low and the light flat, the long afternoon giving way toward dusk, still an hour away. The air had been loud with the sawing of cicadas, but as it began to cool, they were less busy at it. The floor of the arroyo was firm and flat, and he made easy time. The earth gave off the day's heat. The smell of juniper was ticklish and sharp. He heard a snake rustle in the dry thorns, surprised out of its drowsy torpor, and in a wingbeat, a pair of magpies tipped past him, close to the ground, piebald in black and white, showing long, iridescent tails. Then everything was still.

Benny stopped at the piñons and got his bearings. The arroyo was pretty much screened by scrub, so he scrambled out the steeper side and looked around, as he'd been told. He saw a small *casita* another few hundred yards away, upslope, just below the

crest of a low hill. Lombardy poplars were planted as a windbreak. Benny guessed there was adequate groundwater.

He flexed his shoulders and went up the hill, unsure what he might find. And unsure, in truth, what he *hoped* to find. He thought again of the women at the church, the unspoken caution.

He heard music playing softly as he approached the *casita*, something classical, Romantic, like Debussy or Dvořák. Benny was no judge. The front door was ajar, the screen latched. He knocked, but nobody answered. He went around back. The music was clearer, now, coming through an open window. There was a small patio cut into the hillside, and a dry-fit retaining wall, made of schist, the stone put together by hand, each piece selected for shape and size, holding back the earth. The patio furniture was homemade, too, or found. A cable drum from the electric company for a table, three chairs hammered together out of shakes and deadwood, in a vaguely Adirondack style. The man sitting by himself on the patio was Leo Teixeira—who other?—but he wasn't at all the same, in Benny's eyes.

"*Buenas tardes*," Benny said.

Benny was old, he knew, but Leo seemed older. His gaze was milky with cataracts, and his body looked shapeless, as if he'd shrunk down inside himself with age. He looked up at Benny with placid anticipation, glad of the company.

"I'm Rubén Salvador," Benny said.

If he'd expected a shock of recognition at his name, he was disappointed. Leo didn't seem to realize who he was.

"I used to be county sheriff, in Rio Arriba," Benny said.

Leo gestured toward one of the chairs. Benny moved closer, but remained standing. It wasn't, after all, a social call.

"I wanted to talk about old times," Benny said. "Maybe how they come to haunt the present."

Leo shrugged, and glanced away. "*Achaques quiere la*," he said, speaking at last. His voice sounded rusty, out of disuse, perhaps, or simply impatience.

Achaques quiere la was shorthand for an expression, the kind of thing your grandmother told you when you were full of excuses for bullying your little sister. *Achaques quiere la muerte para llavarse el difunto*. Loosely translated, "Death doesn't need an alibi to steal the corpse." Benny was at a loss. He didn't have the slightest idea what Leo meant.

"Not that many people come to see me," Leo said.

Maybe they don't have the stomach for it, Benny thought.

"My hate is stronger than theirs," Leo said reflectively.

"Judge Maestas came to see you," Benny said. "Took you out to dinner, down in Española."

Leo nodded. "No pork fat in the *posole*," he said. "Lot of lesbians,

vegetarians. Fluoride. Communists.”

Benny was surprised how fast they’d gotten there. “You and the judge, did you find common ground?”

“A weak sister,” Leo said, in a tone that suggested it was sorry, but inevitable. “Justice isn’t evenhanded. You can’t weigh sin in the balance with virtue. You can strike for right, or be found wanting. The man had no iron in his bowels.”

“What did you expect to get out of the exchange, a claim on his loyalties?”

Leo snorted. “I wanted shut of him,” he said.

“You mean you didn’t want to make a court appearance?” Leo would have been called as a witness, if there were a hearing.

“It was all a waste of time. He refused to hear the truth. I felt played for a fool.”

“If the judge wanted background on the *Alianza*, who better to ask?” Benny suggested. “He would have heard the stories, but you were part of them, one of the leading actors.”

Leo nodded. “I had a *cause*, once,” he agreed.

Benny knew well enough.

“That cause deflected me from my true purpose,” Leo said. “It’s not what happened last week, or last year, or twenty years ago. The sin, the injustice, goes back far more than that.”

Benny was thinking Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican War, a hundred and fifty years, give or take.

Leo was looking in a different direction. “It’s the Jews,” he confided, in a fierce whisper.

Benny thought he’d misheard him.

“They’re behind it all, pulling the secret levers. They try and hide their machinery, but we’ll expose them. You see it hover over them like a dark halo, the shape of the Beast.”

Oh, sweet bleeding Jesus, Benny thought, defeated.

Leo nodded, satisfied. “The mark of Cain,” he said.

Benny stared down at him, a shrunken old man with milky eyes, lost in private reverie. Every man pays for his own acts, and no one can forgive him his trespasses but God. What could Benny say now? For all his anger, Benny had always in his heart believed Leo was right, that there was a terrible injury done the Hispanic settlers of the Rio Grande. They’d been betrayed, lied to, their birthright stolen, but Leo had betrayed them, yet again, with *this* lie.

Leo, though, seemed immeasurably perked up, the prospect of gaining a convert reviving his energies.

Benny had been led on as well. The long, bitter grudge he’d nursed all these years came down to sad disappointment. He was repelled, as if by the touch of diseased flesh. The chance to settle some old scores, Johnny Lee had said. But what about the chance to trade with the devil for your own soul? If the people in the vil-

lage had quarantined Leo Teixeira, as Benny now suspected, they had good reason. To avoid contamination.

"I had a certain reputation, you know," Leo said.

A reputation is hard to live down, Benny reminded himself, smiling faintly. The echo of that thought went back sixty years or more.

"I mean to put it to better use," Leo said, his voice sly.

Benny turned and walked away.

The old man called after him angrily, not yet done with his catalogue of perfidy. He never would be.

It was so *pedestrian*, Benny thought. Teixeira might be a hateful old man, but Benny didn't hate him anymore. Because of Leo Teixeira, Benny had killed eight men. At the time, it had seemed necessary, but Benny had never gotten over it. He'd thought his fame a lie, his notoriety based on murder. And now this— He had no word to describe it. Inconsequentiality? He experienced it as an almost physical insult, a body blow.

Benny's wife Teresa could have explained it to him, had she still been alive. He missed her, her comfort, her counsel.

The light was fading, the sky a bruise. Benny stumbled once or twice on his way back to the car, missing his footing in the lengthening dusk. He felt his age.

The past only casts a long shadow if you desire to change it, and that, of course, is impossible. We may smile to ourselves over small triumphs, or remember the way a particular woman smelled, deny our embarrassments, regret our failings. We yearn for experience when we're young, and when we're older, we covet the inexperience of our youth. But, of necessity, we become the accumulation of our choices. We can't go back and choose again. Benny understood his life to have been defined by his own choices, for the most part, and he couldn't undo them. He could only consent. If others had chosen a direction for him to follow, there was no turning back now. *Achaques quiere la*. Maybe, in some odd way, Leo had given him absolution, or an allowance, perhaps, a way out of this thicket, shambling through the deepening twilight.

Benny leaned on the car and caught his breath. He'd given up smoking some years before, but right at this moment he wanted a cigarette ferociously. The comfort of a bad habit.

There was a faint glow of light from inside the small adobe church.

Benny went in. It felt empty, but some votive candles had been lit, warming the space, at least to appearances. The scent of burning wax dispelled the lingering smell of mildew.

Benny had long since given up on religion, but Teresa had always kept her faith. Feeling a little awkward about it, he lit a candle in memory of his dead wife, for her grace and for her merits. And for the salvation of her soul, of which he had no doubt.

And then, covering his bets, he lit one for his own. ●

2003 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

It's that time again: our opportunity to sum up and evaluate our year's work, and your opportunity to comment and express your preferences.

2003 at *EQMM* was a year of opening up borders. With the inauguration of the Passport to Crime series and particularly strong entries in the Department of First Stories, *EQMM* readers got a first look, in 2003, at an array of exceptionally gifted authors never before published in the United States. Our sampling of the mystery genre in other cultures has revealed many differences in style, atmosphere, attitude, and even approach to detection. But it has also shown how extensively American and British crime writing has entered into the consciousness of mystery writers all over the globe. This is particularly evident in the Passport story from France, which pays direct homage to a great American mystery writer, Edgar Allan Poe.

This year's pool of First Stories authors includes talent from many different parts of the United States and Canada, and in several of the stories, locale is integral to the mystery. From Britain, in 2003, we obtained the work of several authors already established there, but new to North American readers.

But let's not let new acquaintances make us forget old friends. *EQMM*'s longtime contributors—from the U.S., Britain, Canada, and elsewhere—also had a splendid year, providing us with some dazzling examples of the private eye and crime story, the classical whodunit, psychological suspense, and much more.

Our authors, editors, artists, and production people have finished their work for 2003, and now it's your turn to make a contribution. A strong return of readers-award ballots helps us to plan for the coming year. It tells us which authors we should feature more often, and shows the success or failure of experiments such as our Passport series. Please do take the time to refer to the year's index on pages 140–142, make your choices, and send back the ballot on the reverse page.

The rules for 2003 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place

choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 2003 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 2004 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 2003 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Comments:



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FISHERMAN'S FRIEND

by Ingrid Noll

*Translated from the German by
Mary Tannert*

As fate would have it, I met both men at those stupid anglers' parties. Even when I was just a girl, once a year mother and I had to attend a summer party with father's sporting friends and their families. As if fish were in short supply the rest of the year. . . . The women made potato salad, coffee cake, and other culinary tours de force, and the men saw to it that there were kegs of beer and grilled fish. The children sprayed each other with their water pistols and howled because the wasps stung them. People gorged themselves, swilled beer, sang loudly and badly, and hopped about the dance floor, but the event always retained a semblance of discipline and order. The whole thing was held in a clubhouse by the lake, or, in good weather, on the meadow next to the dock. It was under the festive lanterns that I met Eugene and later Ulli.

I was seventeen at the time, and as dumb as they come. I didn't understand that Eugene only had designs on me because he had heard the clock ticking and had begun to panic: He was nearly forty and hadn't managed yet to find a woman who would take the bait. I thought his age was a sign of distinction. A man who was

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nearly as old and conservative as my father, and who wanted me, of all people. What a stroke of luck! Eugene was short and scrawny and neither funny nor interesting, but at least he had some money. He had an old and established specialty store that sold umbrellas, gloves, and hats. Up until that day I had always worn the mittens that Grandma knitted for me, but from then on I became the owner of a collection of the finest leather gloves.

My parents weren't much smarter than I was, because they too regarded Eugene's courtship of me as the purest good fortune. *Don't dillydally, just take him!* they urged. I wasn't merely naive, you see; my career as a postal carrier wasn't turning out to be too promising, either.

And so I was married at eighteen, and a mother at nineteen. At the beginning I was supposed to help in the shop, but I lost interest quickly after my first attempts. I didn't know the first thing about the business, and the salesladies couldn't take me seriously as their superior. It offended me that they whispered about me behind my back, and not kindly, either. I probably annoyed Eugene so much with my miserable whining that he never wanted to see me in the shop again. So I stayed at home. There was enough to do with my child and my home, and at the beginning I was almost content.

It took awhile before I got to know Eugene better. His hobbies were fishing and cars. He had a Land Rover for sporting activities and a big Mercedes for the city. Since he was so short, he always wore a plaid hat from his shop so that at least a smidgen of him was visible behind the wheel. He was the first in the store in the morning and the last to leave at night. When he got home, he wanted to eat, watch television, read the ADAC* motor report or an anglers' magazine, and be comfortable in his bathrobe and slippers. He spent the weekends, if it wasn't raining buckets, at the lake in purely male company. After he had produced an heir to his realm so swiftly, he appeared to have lost all interest in providing the world with a second.

However, Eugene knew that a young woman has certain expectations in general, and this gave him a permanently bad conscience. This he dealt with by being very generous financially. I had a sizable allowance and could buy clothes, cosmetics, shoes, and bags to my heart's content without his ever complaining. He was even proud that the little brown sparrow at his side had molted and gradually acquired the luxurious plumage of a golden pheasant. Sometimes we went out for dinner, and he enjoyed the way I attracted attention from men as well as from women. When our son was born, he gave me a string of pearls, and for our fifth anniversary a fur coat. Not particularly original, but well-meant.

*ADAC stands for *Allgemeiner Deutscher Automobil-Club*; similar to the U.S.'s AAA.

My changed appearance—in addition to the chic clothes I had simply become prettier—also resulted in an enhanced self-image and a desire to get out and do things. Every afternoon I took my little one to the castle park, let him play for a while on the playground, and then visited the cafe there. Jonas got a big dish of ice cream, and I ordered a double espresso. Unfortunately, at this time of day it was mostly elderly ladies or mothers and children who were out and about, so that I had no opportunity to flirt with any men.

But that changed at the next summer's anglers' party. I had known Ulli since we were both children, but then my family had moved away. Ulli had finished school and become a textiles engineer. He had recently gotten his first job in the weaving mill here in town. He was the exact opposite of Eugene—young, good-looking, tall and strong, fun and not a bit boring. Naturally all the girls were after him, and I figured I didn't have much of a chance, but sometimes fortune helps a girl along. Ulli was looking for a used car, and Eugene wanted to sell his Land Rover. They agreed to meet on Sunday at our house.

I had put on coffee and made myself pretty even though they would almost certainly not take me along on their test drive. But luck was with me again: Just before Ulli arrived, the police called. Eugene's store had been broken into during the night. My husband drove over right away to assess the damage, and I was supposed to take care of our guest in the meantime, lead him to the garage and show him the car. Our son always spent the weekend with my parents—"So that you can sleep late," they always said, an offer doubtless directly related to their hope for a granddaughter.

Ulli wanted to do more than just look at the car; he wanted to test it off-road. We got in, drove into the woods, stopped, and kissed. Then we drove home without a word. When poor beset Eugene got home, he didn't even notice how wound up I was. I had fallen in love, probably for the first time in my life.

From that point on, there was no stopping me. Twice a week in the afternoon, I dropped Jonas off with my parents, met Ulli in his apartment around five o'clock, and was back home by the time Eugene arrived at seven. My illicit excursions were, naturally, risky—in a mid-sized city such as ours, the identity of Ulli's visitor would scarcely escape his neighbors for long. It was just a matter of time until someone would drop hateful hints to Eugene in the store or at his regular pub night. But now that I loved Ulli, I simply couldn't stand my husband anymore. At first I imagined the divorce; later I pictured Eugene's death. The second scenario had the advantage that I would receive a good widow's pension and the proceeds of the life-insurance policy. I would then be finan-

cially independent, because I never again wanted to forgo a certain luxury.

Although I am not a particularly creative person, I began to form a plan to systematically arouse Ulli's ire against Eugene. In Phase I, I painted myself as a saint at the unprotected mercy of a sadist. This awakened both Ulli's chivalrousness and his sympathy; he wanted to rescue me from the clutches of the devil by spiriting me away. In Phase II, I got more concrete: I planted the idea in Ulli's mind that marriage would be the solution to all our troubles, and intimated that, in the event of a divorce, Eugene would try to cheat me out of all the money. After mature consideration, it was obviously preferable to my lover to acquire a wealthy wife. Phase III took aim directly at the threat to our lives: If Eugene were to learn of our relationship, he would probably kill us both. Ulli was, as I mentioned, a tall, strong, and handsome lad, but not an overly intelligent one. He believed me utterly, and saw that we had to get a jump on Eugene.

My husband was therefore surprised when, one evening, I asked him about his fishing grounds. "Since when are you interested in my hobbies?" he asked, and then told me how he had recently discovered a little lake in the Odenwald Forest where he could catch marvelous fish in complete solitude. But it was just like gathering wild mushrooms, he noted: He would never reveal his secret locations to a single soul. "But you could tell me, I'm no rival!" I protested. "Take us with you sometime," I begged. "It would be absolutely heavenly for our son. . . ." Up to now, Jonas had never had much fun fishing; he was too small to sit still for hours staring into the water. Eugene wasn't really very enthusiastic at the prospect, but he understood that he would have to accustom his son gradually to the manly joys of the wilderness.

That little lake really wasn't easy to find. We had to drive down dirt roads and through muddy meadows, but that was child's play for the new sport-utility vehicle. I sat in the back with Jonas, furtively making notes and drawing little maps. I almost began to regret never having accompanied Eugene on his Sunday jaunts. It was marvelous here. Even though it was still early in the year and quite chilly, the sun came out occasionally, lit up the still, glassy water, and warmed us. Wild ducks went about their business undisturbed, pussy willows bloomed, and Eugene and Jonas set up the folding chairs we had brought and cast their lines. I went for a little walk. When I got back a quarter of an hour later, Jonas had already gotten cold and bored and was sitting in the car reading comic books.

"If you can feel the peace out here," said Eugene, "then maybe it'll be clearer to you that my real life doesn't just take place in the store. Out here, I'm Robinson Crusoe; I feel alive."

Not for long, I thought. I'll see to that!

A few days later, I drove out there with Ulli and showed him the hidden lake.

"Now when you 'run into' Eugene out here on Sunday, you have to behave as if you've just discovered this paradise. It shouldn't be any problem to throw him into the water accidentally and hold his head under just a little while you're 'rescuing' him. Don't forget to put on your waders!" Ulli nodded. We wandered around the lake, holding hands and standing still occasionally to kiss or look at a water bird. I broke off several cattails before it occurred to me that I couldn't take them home. Suddenly a forest ranger turned up. What were we doing here? This was a wildlife sanctuary! Couldn't we read the signs? Obviously, Eugene had found a roundabout way into the sanctuary, a route that lay far from any posted notices. We were given a friendly warning and sent home; people are considerate of lovers.

Unfortunately, I couldn't tell Eugene that he was fishing in forbidden waters. On the other hand, it was entirely possible that he knew it already, that he had special permission from the forest ranger. Eugene had helpful pals and sports buddies everywhere. For his part, he was always ready with a generous discount off the purchase of fishing hats, olive-green scarves, and fingerless hunting gloves.

Ulli wanted to try his luck next Sunday, anyway. Because it was still early spring, it wasn't likely that anyone else would be around to run into. And if the forest ranger turned up again, he'd just have to change his plans at short notice.

On the Sunday in question, Jonas was with my parents, as always, and I waited for Ulli's phone call. I would never have thought that I could become so agitated: I hadn't slept a wink at all the night before. I couldn't eat a thing, but I drank cognac to soothe my nerves. The house was completely quiet. Nothing stirred. I dialed Ulli's number in vain. Gradually it grew dark and I had to go pick up Jonas, and of course I had to behave as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Jonas and I had been home for ages and we were sitting in front of the television—although I remember nothing of the program we watched—when I heard Eugene's car. I ran to the door. Ulli and Eugene climbed out, the best of friends. They seemed unimpressed by my face, white as a sheet. Instead, they turned their attention to a large plastic bag that they took from the trunk. "It's almost too good to freeze," said Eugene. "I've never caught such a large pikeperch myself—that was definitely beginner's luck!"

Ulli had apparently forgotten all our plans: Eyes shining, he presented me with his fat fish. "I'd never have managed that without your husband," he assured me gratefully.

The two men potted around the kitchen while I put Jonas to bed. They had decided on the spot to cook the pikeperch for dinner. Ulli peeled potatoes while Eugene cleaned the fish and removed the scales. However, that was the extent of my husband's kitchen prowess, and it wasn't long before the two fishing buddies sat in the living room drinking beer while I, tears in my eyes, fried the fish in one pan and the potatoes in another. They had left me a nice pile of fish innards and potato peels in addition to spilled schnapps and splattered kitchen tiles. It all stank to high heaven.

The two of them ate with obvious gusto. Eugene told tall tales about his previous successes and Ulli bragged about today's catch. I sat there and couldn't eat a bite or say a word. The two men made plans for next weekend—they had obviously become the best of friends in an astonishingly short time. Naturally, more than half of that magnificent fish was left over even though both men had eaten like farmhands. "We'll eat the rest tomorrow," suggested Eugene. I shook my head. Neither Jonas nor I liked a constant diet of fish leftovers, and I had promised the boy schnitzel with french fries tomorrow. "I'd rather freeze it all," I said.

I resisted the impulse to consign the remainder of the hacked-up fish to the garbage. Carefully I removed the fishbones, pulled off the skin, and put the flesh in the blender. Then I mixed in some softened bread crumbs, salt, curry powder, capers, finely minced onion, and crème fraîche and put together a tasty batch of fish croquettes. Just as I was about to fry them and then put them in the freezer, I had a brilliant idea. Carefully I removed some larger and smaller fish bones from the garbage and inserted them lovingly and unobtrusively in the croquettes I had just formed. Only then did I fry and freeze them so that my sportsmen could take a surprise picnic along on their next fishing trip. Buttered black bread and a green salad would be the perfect accompaniments.

Next Sunday, they were touched by the bountiful picnic basket I had prepared. As a loving wife and secret mistress, I had included, along with the croquettes garnished with lettuce and tomatoes, red-checked napkins, a salt shaker, and even little bottles of schnapps, even though a genuine angler always has his own hip flask along.

My initial fury at Ulli had, meanwhile, given way to an unbri-dled thirst for revenge. He had actually dared to play the injured party after I called him to complain. "Your husband is really very nice," he insisted. "I really don't understand what you have against him! Thank God everything turned out different than you planned. Or did you really think that I could commit murder?"

That day, too, I had to wait an eternity for a sign of life from the anglers. I painted mental pictures of the various fish bone catastrophes that could occur, from panicky coughing to suffocation

attacks. Maybe they had scented the danger and my evil intentions at the very first bite, and any minute now they'd be standing at the door, their hunting knives drawn. But Eugene came home alone and barely said hello. Only upon insistent questioning on my part did I discover that Ulli had already gone home. The following morning, Eugene continued to behave strangely. He left the house early without either eating breakfast or saying goodbye. I couldn't find the picnic basket, either in his car or in the garage. Even though pride nearly kept me from it, I called Ulli at his office. His secretary informed me that he wasn't available. And he didn't answer the phone at home long after he surely had to be there.

Two days later, I read in the newspaper that a dead forest ranger had been found in a wildlife sanctuary on a little lake in the Odenwald. The owner of a Land Rover was being sought as a witness, since tire tracks at the scene had to have come from such a vehicle. Whether death was due to murder or an accident could not be determined until an autopsy had been conducted, but signs pointed to death as the result of asphyxiation. Other puzzling finds included several small schnaps bottles and the remains of a picnic.

I confronted Eugene. It had to be the lake he had shown me, those were surely the tire tracks from his Rover, and the picnic must be the one from my kitchen. Had the forest ranger caught him fishing illegally? Eugene broke down. The forest ranger collected a regular "donation" for allowing illegal fishing; they were acquainted and understood each other. On that Sunday, they had exchanged meals. The trade netted Ulli and Eugene two kinds of sausage—Hungarian *Kabanossi* and *Landjager*—plus black bread with goose schmaltz. For his part, the forest ranger fell on the croquettes. When he suffocated after a horrifying attack of choking and coughing that could not be helped even when they pounded on his back, shook him, and stuck fingers down his throat, they had been overcome by panic and had run away. But they hadn't gone directly home, they had gone to a pub near our house. "We had to calm down first," Eugene explained, seeming at that moment even shorter to me than usual. Naturally, I couldn't tell a soul about his confession: My own role in this drama had to be kept in the dark. I just hoped that Ulli could hold his tongue.

All three of us probably suffered disturbing dreams for the next few days and weeks, and every ring of the phone, every stranger's step at the door seemed to threaten us. But nothing happened. Neither Ulli nor the police got in touch. Slowly I stopped thinking constantly about the dead man at the lake, began to wipe the treacherous Ulli from my memory, and returned my attention to

everyday life. Jonas was about to start school—an important event for mother and child.

Several months had gone by when I received a phone call from a woman I did not know. “My name isn’t important; just call me Adelheid,” she said, and hinted that she knew things that were of great importance to me. In the event that I wasn’t willing to meet her as she suggested, she wouldn’t hesitate to bring to public attention a certain secret that we both knew.

What choice did I have? In my fear, I thought she could only be a blackmailer who would threaten to inform my husband of my relationship with Ulli—which had long since ended. I would probably have to pay.

Jonas was with my parents, Eugene was off fishing, and I sat in a cafe across from this unfamiliar woman, prudently in the nearest metropolis and not in our little city. This so-called Adelheid let the cat out of the bag right away. Over a double espresso and warm apple strudel with vanilla ice cream, I discovered that she was the widow of the dead forest ranger. On the basis of his notes she had discovered who was responsible for the monthly “donation.” Her husband had even confided to her that he sometimes met a “pal” at the lake whose financial boosts were contributing to their planned vacation in the Caribbean.

“When the police came to tell me of my husband’s death, they brought a picnic basket with them, which they set down in my kitchen. It didn’t belong to me. I examined the basket and its contents while I was making them some coffee. I already suspected that someone had poisoned my husband, so I removed one of the two fish croquettes. I mean, you hear everywhere that they’re so careless in the labs.”

She didn’t look like the grieving widow. She was well-dressed, nicely made-up, and well-preserved, I noted, and moreover, she knew how to tell her story with a certain liveliness and suspense. But what did she want from me?

“The police took the basket and its contents with them when they learned that none of it came from our house. Moreover, my suspicion of the labs was justified; the result of the chemical analysis merely confirmed that there was no poison in the fish. However, during the autopsy they had discovered immediately that my husband’s death was ultimately due to a fish bone in his throat; that is, he had choked on his own vomit. So those clever fellows concluded that it must have been an accident, because, naturally, fish croquettes can contain a few bones.”

“And what does this have to do with me?” I asked, unable to prevent a feverish blush spreading across my face.

She went on. “The fish mixture was prepared in a blender, I could see that right away. If a few fish bones had gotten in unbe-

knownst to you, they would also have been chopped to pieces. Every homemaker knows that. So it was clear that you had introduced the fish bones intentionally afterward, and not in the most loving frame of mind." I looked "Adelheid" full in the face. She returned my gaze without protest, even with a certain admiration. Finally, we both smiled.

"You have done me a great service," she said, "because I've wanted to get rid of that simpleton of a wilderness man for a long time, but he couldn't be bothered to do me the favor of taking out any life insurance. He said that it wasn't necessary, since as the widow of a civil servant I would be well-off."

That was indeed unfortunate, I had to admit. "And how would you be situated in such a case?" she asked sympathetically. Proudly I related that Eugene was not so petty. In the event of his death I was very well provided for.

We met several times until all the details of the plan were mature. It was summer by the time she called and, in a mysterious voice, lured a fearful Eugene to the lake. She claimed to have found something there that belonged to him. Strangely enough, Eugene confided in me. The forest ranger's wife had insisted that he come to the lake. She probably wanted to blackmail him on the basis of his earlier payments to the forest ranger, he surmised. If he wasn't back by seven on the dot, I should call Ulli and hurry to his aid. Unfortunately, he couldn't take anyone with him: The woman had explicitly insisted that he come alone.

In the still part of the lake, we had propped one of Eugene's hats over a willow branch. We lay in wait in the reeds, crouched in a shallow rowboat, clad in heavy men's shoes to leave a false trail, and drinking from the dead forest ranger's hip flask.

Eugene arrived punctually, waited in nervous agitation, looked constantly at his watch, and finally noticed the hat on the willow branch. He was obviously puzzled, and hesitated at least ten minutes before he finally pulled on his hip waders and waded into the water. We were on the spot quickly, felled him with the oars, held his head for a suitable length of time underwater, and left him to his beloved fish.

My vacation with Adelheid is shaping up nicely. We've outfitted ourselves with some chic new clothes, and it won't take long before the good-looking, wealthy men in the Caribbean flock to our sides. Sportsmen who go in for deep-sea fishing generally have the good sense to choose rich parents. ●



THE CHAIN

by Iain Rowan

“You know what this is about, Mr. Jackson,” the voice said. Jackson wasn’t sure what to say, so he said nothing. He had expected a man, though, a coarse and threatening voice. That or the woman herself, not this stranger, this dry, educated accent.

“Listen. The first thing to understand is that if you involve the police or try to trace me in any way, all of the photos will reach your wife. You must understand this before we move on. Do you understand this, Mr. Jackson?”

“I—yes. Look, I don’t care who you are, I just want to settle—”

“Be quiet. Listen. If you involve the police, the photos get to your wife. If you try and trace me or follow me, the photos get to your wife. If you employ anyone to observe any meetings we may have, the photos get to your wife. Do you understand this?”

“Yes.” She’s nervous, Jackson thought. I can hear it in her voice, she’s nervous. Sounds like she’s reading this from a bloody script.

“Good. We have twelve more photos. You will get all of them back at the end of our arrangement, including negatives. We have taken no copies and—”

“How much?”

"Mr. Jackson, if you interrupt again I will hang up the phone and the chance of any arrangement will be ended. Is this clear?"

"Yes."

"We have taken no copies and once the arrangement is complete you will never hear from us again. You have in your possession four photos, as a demonstration that this is no hoax. Remember, involve no third parties."

I'll involve third parties, Jackson thought. Once I have all the photos back I'll find you, you and whoever's behind you. And when I find you, I'll gladly pay out more money to get your legs broken.

"Do you understand this?"

"Yes."

"You must do everything as directed. Wednesday morning at ten o'clock, go to the phone box outside the branch of WH Smith next to the railway station. Bring five thousand pounds."

"But I can't get—" The woman had gone and the dial tone hummed until Jackson replaced the receiver. He could get the five thousand. There was his own savings account with the money he had been tucking away to pay for an anniversary surprise for Julia, a holiday to Malta at Easter, and he could borrow more on his credit card. He could get the money, but should he?

He sat on the stool beside the telephone and turned a manilla envelope over and over in his hands. The envelope was ordinary in every way. Large enough to take an A4 sheet of paper folded once, small enough to fit through a letter box, mass-produced, unremarkable, one of millions. Inside it were four black-and-white photographs, and nothing else. In one he was sitting in a bar, frozen in a moment of laughter. A woman sat opposite him, her back to the camera. The next photo was taken in a small room, light from a spotlight spilling over a bed where Jackson sat with his head thrown back and his eyes shut, the long dark hair of the woman covering some of his body. In the third photo the woman was out of view again, most of her body hidden by the expanse of his back, his pallid skin luminous in the glossy opalescent greys of the photograph. The last picture was taken outside in bright sunshine. It showed an older woman who was walking towards the arched entrance of a building, carrying a briefcase. This time there was no effort made to hide her face. It was Julia, on her way into work. Bastards.

Iain Rowan's fiction has appeared in several print magazines in the science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres. In the mystery genre, he has been published twice in on-line magazines (*Plots with Guns* and *Handheld Crime*) and once in *AHMM*. Mr. Rowan hails from Sunderland, England. In his debut for us he has given a new twist to one of mystery's oldest subjects. ‡

It had been four weeks ago—four weeks to the day, he realised. Four weeks and one hundred and fifty miles. He hadn't wanted to stay overnight at the conference, but his headaches had been troubling him and he knew that two long drives in one day would just make things worse. The company would pay, the hotel would be comfortable, and he could relax, have dinner and a beer. It was after his third drink that he noticed her. She was sitting at a table near him, lingering over her drink, restless in her seat. Jackson watched her over his newspaper, admiring the way her body moved within her dress, snatching glances at her lips, wet from her drink. The woman looked at her watch, around the bar, at her watch again, at the door, took a quick, nervous drink, and then looked at her watch a third time. Fool, Jackson thought. Whoever stood her up was a fool. He looked across at her again, and then looked away, embarrassed. She had been looking directly at him. Maybe she had noticed him staring at her, watching the way her dress moved against the contours of her body as she fidgeted in her chair. Time to feign disinterest, just in case the boyfriend turned up and she pointed Jackson out to him, caused a scene. In fact, if the boyfriend showed, Jackson thought, he would go up to his room anyway. There was nothing else of interest in the bar other than the woman, and if he couldn't watch her he might as well lie on his bed and watch one of the hotel cable channels. One of the adult channels. Oh, hell. She was coming over. Jackson folded up his newspaper, ready to make a quick exit in case of an embarrassing scene.

"Hello," the woman said. She was younger than Jackson had thought, now that he could see beneath the makeup. "Sorry to bother you."

"No, no, not at all," Jackson said. She wasn't going to shout at him, then.

"Can you tell me, please, is this the right time?" She held a pale wrist out towards him. He thought of how it would feel to kiss the perfumed skin, but looked at her watch and then at his own instead.

"Well, if your watch is wrong, then so is mine."

"Oh, brilliant, just brilliant. Sorry, not you."

"That's okay. Someone not turned up?"

"My fault. I should have known better, believe me, it's not the first time. But it's going to be the last." She turned to walk away, and the air around Jackson filled with her perfume, a mixture of the scent she wore and the warmth of her skin. In a moment, she would be gone.

"Well, as you're here, can I at least buy you a drink? Make up for some of the time you've wasted?" Jackson cringed as he said it. It sounded so obvious, so clichéd, and he prepared himself for the inevitable rejection. The woman stopped, turned back, took another quick look at her watch. Then she put her purse and mobile phone down on the table, pulled the heavy chair out, and that is how it began.

One drink turned into several drinks, and Jackson lost himself in a haze of alcohol and desire. The way she laughed, the way she brushed her hair back away from her eyes, the way she laid her hand on his when she was emphasising a point, her skin hot against his; all these things drew him further in. She—Emma, she said her name was—mentioned her flat, not far from the hotel, said that she intended to walk back there, and Jackson gallantly offered to accompany her.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she said, her voice low, “I hate hotel rooms, so impersonal,” and Jackson suddenly felt dizzy, as if he had stood up too quickly. The short walk began with them beside each other and ended up with her leaning into him, arm wrapped around his waist under his coat. She steered him down a street of large Victorian terraced houses, each house with four or more bells by the door. They stopped outside the end house, and as he stood for a moment, uncertain, caught between temptation and awkwardness, she lifted up onto tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his, the tip of her tongue parting his lips. She tasted of alcohol and oranges. Then they were in through the door, and up the dimly lit stairs, and onto the cold white sheets of her bed.

White sheets, like a canvas. The high lamp that she had insisted on leaving on painted their bodies on the sheets for the benefit of the camera. Thinking back, Jackson couldn’t work out where the camera had been hidden. He had a vague recollection of some shelves on the far wall, a clutter of ornaments in an otherwise surprisingly bare room. How could he have been so stupid? How could he? Sixteen photos. Twelve to go. Twelve small, badly lit photos between him and the end of his marriage.

Two minutes to ten on a damp, cold morning, and the woman in the phone box wasn’t showing any signs of finishing her call. Jackson loitered outside, watching oversized sea gulls strutting across the road while pigeons huddled in fat-chested ranks along the second-story window sills. He looked at his watch for the fourth time in a minute, and glowered at the woman. She looked at him briefly with empty eyes and then turned her back on him. Stacked on top of the phone was a small pile of change. For all Jackson knew, he wasn’t even meant to be inside the phone box, maybe he was just meant to stand around here until someone sidled up to him and asked if he “had the package.” He looked around, checking out the early-morning shoppers. Not him, the old man winding along past the shop windows, taking one step sideways for every two steps forward. Her, the woman walking towards him now? No, her children have come around the corner behind her, running towards the sea gulls, waving their arms. Perhaps this well-dressed woman, walking slowly down from the station. The woman on the phone had an accent that would match those

clothes. Why was she walking so slowly? Was she looking at him, or was that just because he was staring at her? Staring at women was what got him into this thing in the—and then the phone rang.

He spun round and saw that the phone box was empty. The woman with the stack of coins must have left it a moment earlier, because he could see her walking away into the distance. He pulled the door open and grabbed the phone off the hook with a flailing hand before the rest of him even made it into the box.

"Hello?" For a second or two, there was nothing but the distant hiss of the phone line and the sound of the children outside. Please, let it not be a wrong number, Jackson thought.

"Mr. Jackson. When this call ends, hang up the phone and then walk to the bin by the railway station. Inside it is a blue plastic bag. Take it and walk, it doesn't matter where. Don't loiter, don't look in it, just walk."

The connection ended before Jackson could say anything in return. He hung up the phone and walked towards the station. A train had just come in, and dozens of people spilled out of the station doors and onto the street, parting like water around the litter bin as some headed into town and others in the opposite direction. Jackson walked up to the bin and hesitated, acutely self-conscious. What would people think if they saw him rummaging through rubbish like some old dosser? It occurred to him that the social disgrace of being seen rummaging in a bin was somewhat less than that of being divorced by his wife on the grounds that he'd walked straight into a setup, and he reached into the bin and grabbed the carrier bag. It was very light, and almost empty, although something solid slid about at the bottom. He followed his instructions, not sure whether he was being watched, and walked off, carrying on past the station, past a sport shop and a pizza restaurant, and then down a side street.

The first few bars of "The Blue Danube" came from inside the bag. Jackson jumped, and then reached into the bag, pulled out the mobile phone.

"Good," the woman's voice said. "Now listen. Walk back into town. Get on the number seven bus to the seafront. Get off at the stop by the pier. Wait. Got that?"

"Yes," Jackson said.

"You have the money?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

"Have you spoken to anyone about this matter?"

"No."

"Is anyone following you?"

"No—I mean, I don't think so—I mean, I haven't asked anyone."

"Good. Get the bus."

Again the phone connection dropped.

Jackson stood in the street for a moment. He looked down at the phone, as if staring at it would reveal everything about the people behind this, every detail of who had set him up, why they had chosen him. He briefly thought about walking straight to a police station, confessing the whole embarrassing situation, handing over the phone to them, and hoping that they could deal with the situation—keep it all quiet, round up the villains, and give him his photographs. Then he thought of what it would mean to lose Julia—the loneliness of late middle-age alone, the loss of status at work—and five thousand pounds didn't seem that much to pay anymore. The phone was a cheap one, probably a pay-as-you-go, he thought, paid for in cash, unregistered, untraceable. It occurred to him that the number of the phone that had been used to call him would be in the memory, but he knew that the other phone would be just as anonymous, would lead him nowhere. He put the phone into his pocket and set off towards the bus station, walking fast through the drizzle that drifted down the streets after him.

The doors of the bus creaked open and Jackson hurried across the pavement into the shelter of an amusement-arcade doorway. The arcade was closed, the slot machines and penny falls and air-hockey games waiting for the summer season. It was raining harder now, and Jackson had to squint to be able to look around, the gusty wind coming off the sea throwing the rain into his face. There were few people around. A diminutive figure in a purple anorak walked bent into the wind. An elderly man cycled slowly past on an old-fashioned bike, a wiry-haired terrier peering out of the basket between the handlebars. Directly in front of Jackson, the dark-stained concrete of the pier stretched out, piercing the steel sea. Towards the end of the pier a solitary figure in yellow oilskins stood motionless beside a fishing rod, watching the arc of an invisible nylon line out into the restless swell. Jackson stood as far back into the doorway as he could, one hand in his jacket pocket, holding the mobile phone, waiting, waiting.

After a cold, wet half-hour, the phone rang. It was the woman again. Jackson pictured a face in his mind: pale, youthful beauty fading into mature elegance, pale blond hair curling around the nape of a long neck. Not the image he'd associate with a blackmailer.

"You have the money?"

"Well, I had it an hour ago, and I'm hardly likely to have lost—"

"Shut up. You have the money?"

"Yes."

"Cross the road and walk onto the pier. Walk along the wall on the left-hand side. Count the small blue litter bins on the pier wall. When you reach the third, stop and drop the money in. Do not hesitate. Do not look around. Do not speak to anyone. As soon

as you have dropped the money in the bin, turn and walk straight back off the pier, walk straight back up the road towards the city centre, the road you came along on the bus. Walk all the way until the Posthouse pub, and then you may get a bus back into town. As soon as you drop the money in the bin, walk away and do not look back at any point. Do not look back, do not stop walking. Do you understand this?"

"When do I get the photos?"

The phone connection went dead. Jackson stared down at the handset. Maybe it was just a problem with the mobile network. He poked at the buttons with his finger, trying to find the number of the last caller. Number withheld. The phone rang again.

"Listen. Don't talk until I tell you to."

Jackson nodded, then realised that the person on the phone could not see him. Or maybe they could. He decided to remain silent anyway.

"Do not look back, do not stop walking. Do you understand this?"

"Yes," Jackson said.

"I will call you again."

"But what about my—" Jackson looked at the phone in his hand for a moment, then put it back in his pocket and crossed the road towards the pier.

"Get off the bus," the woman said.

"But I've just got on," Jackson said. "I'm doing what you asked."

"Get off the bus. Go back the way you came. Ten of your photographs and instructions for concluding the arrangement will be in a bag in the bin you put the money in."

"What do you mean, ten? There are twelve. You said that I could have them all back."

"You will. Don't worry, Mr. Jackson. It's nearly over."

There was something different in her voice now.

"I can't get any more money; you asked for five thousand and that's what—"

"It's not about any more money," the woman said, and Jackson realised that what he could hear in her voice was relief. "They won't want any more money. Just follow the instructions and you'll get the last two photos back. Trust me on this, Mr. Jackson."

"Trust you? You've blackmailed me out of five thousand pounds and you expect me to trust you?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jackson. I do know what you are feeling. You'll understand. Goodbye." The phone went dead. Jackson struggled to his feet, fought the motion of the bus all the way up the aisle, and told the driver that he felt ill and had to get off immediately. He walked back towards the seafront.

When he reached the pier, the lone fisherman was gone. Jackson wondered whether the man had packed up his fishing gear,

walked down the stained concrete of the pier, paused briefly by the litter bin, and then walked back to his car with five thousand pounds. Were the photos there, though? Jackson thought, that's all that mattered. Were they there?

They were. Ten prints and ten negatives, in a brown envelope inside another plastic carrier bag. There was a second, bulkier envelope, sealed with parcel tape, that had something with a bit of weight sliding around at the bottom. Jackson folded the bag up, held it tight under his arm, and walked away along the seafront.

A run-down cafe hunched on the corner where the road turned away from the sea. It was almost empty inside, just a few pensioners sipping tea from mismatched crockery and staring out misted-up windows. Jackson bought a cup of coffee, sat as far from anyone else as he could, and opened the bag. He slid the photos out of the first envelope. Despite himself, he felt the stirring of excitement at the memory. Don't be stupid, he thought, these are for burning, not for hoarding away. She was a looker, mind. He carefully sealed the envelope back up, and opened the second one.

His first thought was, oh no, they took more. Then he looked at them, and realised that although the woman was the same—blond this time, though, not dark—the man was not him, and the room was not the same room. There were fifteen photos of them together, and one photo of another woman, pushing a child's pram. There was also a folded sheet of paper. Jackson opened it. At the top was a man's name and an address, a phone number. Underneath were instructions, dates, times—a pattern which was so familiar. At the end of it, Jackson had to make one last phone call, collect money from a litter bin next to the bench in the park that was dedicated to the memory of Alfred Parker, and then wait for a phone call telling him where to dump it. When he'd done that, the final two photos and the negatives would be posted to him. A postscript warned him that if he deviated from this script at all, the last two photos would be sent to his wife. It pointed out that from the moment he made the first phone call, he would be complicit in a serious crime, and so it was to his advantage to follow the instructions to the letter, remembering to retain two of the other man's photos until he received instructions to post them. At that point the arrangement would end and he could forget it had ever happened. He would not be contacted again. At the bottom of the envelope was a cheap mobile phone.

"Bastards," he said. "Bastards."

But Jackson left the cafe, taking the bag with him, and caught a bus back into town. He went to the post office, bought a stamp and an envelope that was ordinary in every way. Large enough to take an A4 sheet of paper folded once, small enough to fit through a letter box, mass-produced, unremarkable, one of millions. ●

MORNING OF THE MURDER

by Helen Tucker

He was so tired by the time he left the statehouse that he forgot to sign out. The guard, sitting at a table near the metal detector, called him back before he reached the door. "Senator Wynford?"

He turned, went back, and put his name on the sign-out sheet. It didn't matter how well you were known to the guard, you still had to sign in and out of the building. "America the Beautiful has become America the Oversecure," he said to the elderly man.

"Or maybe the Insecure," the guard said. "Good night, Senator."

He nodded, too tired to make further conversation, and went to the parking lot beside the building and his reserved space. He got in his Buick and just sat for several minutes, too exhausted even to put the key in the ignition.

He had left home at eight o'clock that morning, stopped at Krispy Kreme for coffee and a donut—his breakfast—and continued on to the statehouse, where he had gone over notes for the speech on the state's education budget that he would give at two o'clock. At lunchtime he had a tuna sandwich at his desk, ordered in. It had been three, however, before he began his speech, because the arguments on the health budget had run over. Then there were the discussions over the pros and cons of his proposals, so it was after six before he finally got away.

For some reason, he thought about his grandfather, the hard-working farmer who had raised him after his parents were killed in a car crash when he was five. Joseph Wynford would come in from the fields, red-faced and sweating, and say, "Feel

Helen Tucker's new tale introduces *EQMM* readers to her series character Max Ballew, a Carolina police detective who first appeared in a story for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* several years ago. Ms. Tucker is currently working on a novel in which Ballew is a central character. She is a former journalist and teacher who has written sixteen published novels (several reprinted in other languages). †

like I just plowed the back forty.”

That was exactly the way Riley felt right now. Totally enervated.

By the time he was in high school, he knew he would not be a farmer. He would never wear himself out physically in hot fields, live hand to mouth, borrow in the spring, pay back in the fall (if the crops came in). He wanted to Be Somebody, have it all.

And he was. And did. Almost.

From the state senate he would go to the U.S. Senate. And then . . . that last step to the top of the ladder, of course. For this, he was willing to toil in the political field, which, he reasoned, was a far cry from the tobacco and cotton fields. He felt his grandfather, whose farm, sold upon his death, had financed his undergraduate and law degrees, would be proud of him.

He started the car, tried to stay focused on the traffic, and was home by six-thirty.

He had to park at the curb in front of the tall, Tudor-style house because there were two police cars in the driveway.

Weary as he was, he jumped out of the car and ran to the house, where he was met at the door by a blue uniform. “Senator Wynford? We’ve been trying to locate you for quite a while.”

“I was in the statehouse. I was there all day.”

“We called your office and were told you were unavailable because—”

“What’s the trouble?” he interrupted. “Has there been a break-in? This neighborhood has been hit twice lately.”

“Come in, Senator.” The cop stood aside as though he were the host and the senator a guest. “Maybe you’d better sit down.”

With a perplexed look on his face, he followed the young officer inside and sank down in a chair in the great room, obviously too tired to hear anything more earthshaking than what he was to have for dinner.

“Sir, I don’t know how to put this any way but bluntly . . .”

At that point an older officer he recognized as the chief of police came in the room, stopped momentarily when he saw the senator, then went to him and extended his hand. “Mr. Wynford, I’m so sorry. I . . .” Then, noticing the puzzled expression on the senator’s face, he turned to the younger officer and said, “You told him?”

“No, sir, I was just about to.”

“What?” Riley Wynford asked. “For God’s sake, what?”

The police chief ran his hand through wiry gray hair and looked down at the floor as he said, “Sir, your wife is dead. Murdered this morning.”

Riley stood for a moment, then fell back into the chair again. “No!” he shouted. “No, you’re wrong. It can’t be. What is this, some kind of stupid joke?”

“I’m sorry, it’s true. Your next-door neighbor, Vera Alton, found

her at about one-thirty. Mrs. Wynford was still in bed. Mrs. Alton said she thought she was asleep until she tried to wake her and couldn't."

"You said murdered. How do you know it was murder? Was she shot or . . ." Riley broke down and buried his face in his hands.

"No, sir, it appears she was strangled. There were marks on her throat, but we won't know for sure until after . . ." He stopped and put his hand on Riley's shoulder. "Again, I'm sorry. We've gone over the room for fingerprints, but there appear to be none except yours and hers. Mrs. Alton said she didn't touch anything except Mrs. Wynford's shoulder when she tried to wake her."

"She and Selena were going to have lunch and go shopping today," Riley said. "Oh, my God!" He buried his face in his hands again, then looked up. "I suppose I have to identify the . . . the body?"

"Mrs. Alton did that. And I wouldn't go into the bedroom just yet. Dusting for fingerprints leaves something of a mess."

Riley put his head down on the arm of the chair and his shoulders shook as he whispered over and over, "Selena, oh God, Selena . . ."

Detective Captain Max Ballew was in the second day of his favorite week of the year. For the past several years, he and four friends had been renting a cottage on Hatteras Island on the Outer Banks every June. They did a little fishing, played a little poker, drank a little beer, and ate seafood until they groaned. It was the only time during the year Max felt totally relaxed. For some reason, he never felt completely carefree when visiting his two sons and their families—being a visitor, accepting the hospitality of others, even close kin, made him a bit edgy—and certainly his work was not what could be called restful. For a few years he had been giving thought to retiring, but when you got right down to it, the job was what kept him going. At least since Evie's death. He would never stop missing her, and if he didn't have the job, he would have all day long to think about how much he missed her. Oh well, he was sixty years old now and it wouldn't be too many years before others would be giving thought to his retirement. He was determined that he would make that decision before it was made for him.

This morning he was walking on the beach even though he knew what the sun could do to him. His reddish complexion was sensitive to all kinds of weather. His sand-colored hair was mostly gray now, and his pale blue eyes looked as though they had faded during the years. He was just over six feet tall and had kept his good build with no protruding stomach or fat.

The beach was deserted except for a couple of his friends who were surf casting. There were signs that a storm might be on the

way, possibly a nor'easter. But the five men wouldn't know for sure until someone from the Coast Guard station came by to warn them. They refused to read a newspaper, look at TV, or listen to radio during their week.

The beach didn't look quite the same this year. The lighthouse had been moved from the water's edge further inland because of beach erosion. Maybe erosion would get the whole island someday, he thought as he walked through the surf. Maybe the entire Outer Banks would go: Kill Devil Hills, Kitty Hawk, Nags Head. It was something to think about. Many residents had had their cottages moved back from the ocean, but what if the ocean and the bay met during a storm? What if someday the only thing that could be seen, sticking up out of the water, was the top of the Wright Brothers' Monument? Yet people still paid a fortune for beach property.

He heard his name called and looked back toward the cottage, where he saw someone on the porch waving to him. Slowly he trudged through the sand, wondering if this was his day for K. P. and he'd forgotten. However, when he reached the porch, it was not one of his friends but a state trooper.

"Captain Ballew?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Sir, you're wanted back in the city. Chief Grayson needs you. He said to come back now and you can take a full week later."

An obscene word occurred to Max but he didn't say it. "What now?" he asked.

"The wife of Senator Riley Wynford was murdered yesterday and Chief Grayson wants you to take over the case. He said you were somewhere on Hatteras and we've been looking for you since early this morning."

"I should have told him I was going to Tierra del Fuego," Max said. The guys would be furious if he left because then there would be only four, and everybody knew it took five to make a decent poker game.

Arriving back at headquarters after the four-hour drive, Max went first to the chief's office. Zack Grayson, only a year or two younger than Max, was standing at the window looking out at Mangum Street as though observing traffic was the most important thing on his day's agenda. His wiry gray hair framed a face that was furrowed and frowning. He turned when Max entered.

"About time," he growled. There was no ceremony between them; they had gone to police academy together in what now seemed another incarnation.

"About time you let me have an uninterrupted week off," Max grumbled. "We both know if the murder victim were the wife of Joe Blow from Pocomo you wouldn't have sent for me."

"True," Grayson admitted. "But one of these days Riley Wynford is going to be a U.S. senator and then probably president. So it behooves us to stay in his good graces by finding out *instantly* who killed his wife."

"Behooves," Max mused. "Haven't heard that word since . . . Come to think of it, I don't remember anyone ever using it."

Grayson sat down at his desk. "We've got to do something and do it *now*. So far we've got zip. The media are on us, the senator is on us, that whole section of town is antsy and screaming for the killer. Jesus, next they'll be screaming for my resignation. Go talk to Ted McKay and let him fill you in. He's handled it so far, but you're taking over now."

McKay was one of the younger detectives who had recently been put on Homicide. His blond curly hair, blue eyes, and baby face belied his thirty-four years. He looked vastly relieved when Max sat down beside his desk in the bullpen and said, "Start from the beginning, what's known and what's unknown."

"Almost everything is unknown," McKay said, "including why anyone would want to kill Selena Wynford. It obviously wasn't a burglary gone bad. She and her next-door neighbor, a divorcée who lives alone, were to have lunch at one o'clock at the Bella Italia and then spend the afternoon shopping at Westside Mall. At one-fifteen, when Vera Alton, the neighbor, hadn't heard from Mrs. Wynford, she phoned and got no answer. So then she went to the house—she has a key—and went in. She found Mrs. Wynford still in bed, in her nightgown, and thought she was asleep. She tried to wake her, discovered she was dead, and called nine-one-one. There were no break-ins, nothing to indicate a robbery, absolutely nothing disturbed in the house. The senator said he'd left his wife asleep at eight yesterday morning. He was in the legislature all day; that was confirmed because everyone has to sign in and out of the building. Also, he said he'd made sure the door was locked when he left the house . . . and by the way, unless the latch is taken off, the front door locks automatically when it's closed. All other doors and windows were locked and undisturbed. The M.E. said Mrs. Wynford died from strangulation—there were marks on her neck—between nine and ten o'clock."

"How many people have keys to the house?"

"Only Senator and Mrs. Wynford and Mrs. Alton."

"How about a cleaning person or housekeeper?"

"They use a cleaning service and Mrs. Wynford always let them in and stayed in the house while they were there. The senator assured me there were no other keys out."

"How's he taking it?"

"He was in a state of shock at first, and now I guess you could

say he's in a state of grief, close to all to pieces. Which reminds me, the funeral is in . . ." He looked at his watch. ". . . thirty minutes at St. John's Church. You want to go?"

Max shook his head. "No, it's only in the movies that the detective goes to the funeral and spots the murderer. You go, I'll pass. I want to go to the house and look around. I trust the senator is staying somewhere else right now?"

"He's staying at the Essex Club as long as the house is yellow-taped." He took a folder from the top of his desk. "Here's what we have, the statements of the senator, Mrs. Alton, the M.E., and the findings . . . or lack of them."

The house was in a quiet cul de sac in one of the best sections of the city. The crime tape looked out of place in such a neighborhood. The house next-door, which Max assumed was Mrs. Alton's, was white brick and its yard, like the Wynfords', was well manicured. Thinking that he was glad he now lived in an apartment and no longer had a lawn to mow, Max smiled as it occurred to him that these people didn't have a lawn to mow, either; they paid someone else to do it.

There was a cop at the door whom Max didn't recognize but who recognized him instantly. "Captain Ballew, go on in. I was told you'd be here."

Max entered the great room and stood looking. There was a huge stone fireplace with built-in bookcases on either side. There were comfortable-looking chairs and divans scattered tastefully around the room. One wall was glass, looking out on a patio and Roman-end swimming pool with woods on the other side of a stone wall.

But the most noticeable thing in the room, the thing which first caught one's eye, was a large portrait over the fireplace, the portrait of a beautiful blond woman with an enigmatic half-smile as she looked down at a long-stemmed red rose she was holding. There was a sweet, soulful look in eyes that were the color of emeralds. The flaxen hair was not quite shoulder-length and was turned under pageboy style. Max returned to the portrait several times before leaving the room. Selena Wynford was indeed a gorgeous woman, giving credence to his theory that beautiful people married beautiful people. He'd seen the senator often enough in the media to know he was a strikingly handsome man: tall, erect, brown eyes, wavy brown hair that occasionally fell across his forehead, giving him a boyish look. He would, of course, have chosen an exquisite wife.

As he stood looking at the portrait, he was reminded of the movie *Laura* and the detective who stared at the portrait of the presumed murder victim. In this case, however, the victim would not turn up alive, and it was more than a crime that such beauty

had been wasted . . . pun intended, he thought.

The dining room contained a long table that would seat twelve, chairs with needlepoint seats, a glistening crystal chandelier, and a china closet filled with more silver trays, pitchers, and dishes than Max had ever seen outside a store.

You had to have money to live like this, he mused. But then, you had to have money to get elected to any office now, and the senator had not arrived at his position in the legislature on charisma alone.

He went through a long pantry and well-appointed kitchen in a hurry, then went upstairs. There were four bedrooms, and it was obvious which was the master suite. There was a double dresser, a TV set, a huge walk-in closet, a chaise longue, another easy chair, a small antique desk in one corner, a dressing room and bath . . . and the king-size bed in which Selena Wynford had been murdered.

The bed was unmade, left exactly as it had been found when the body was discovered, with Selena still in her nightgown at 1:15 P.M. Killed between nine and ten A.M.

Only three sets of keys to the house, all accounted for. No break-in, nothing disturbed. Selena killed in bed, attacked, probably, while she slept. Undoubtedly she awoke and struggled. A struggle would have made a mess of the bed, tangling top sheet and spread. But Mrs. Alton had thought she was sleeping, so the bed was not messed up or she would have noticed and reported it in her statement to the police. And the M.E.'s report stated that there was no sexual activity, neither an attack nor consensual.

The room told Max nothing except what had *not* happened. Nothing of what *had* happened. Maybe after talking to Riley Wynford and Vera Alton . . .

As he was going downstairs, the front door opened and Ted McKay came in. "How was the funeral?" Max asked the younger man.

McKay smiled. "Maybe the movies aren't so far off after all. I may have learned something."

"Tell me," Max said, leaning on the newel post of the stairs.

"The senator seemed really broken up. But Mrs. Alton stood beside him, and every now and then she'd pat his arm, and the way she looked at him made me think . . ."

"Yes?"

"There might be something going on between them. At least on her part."

"Maybe she's just a sympathetic neighbor. A good friend."

"Possibly," McKay conceded, then added, "but the way these politicians play around now, makes you wonder. By the way, Wynford is going to receive a few friends at the Essex Club for the next hour or so."

"I think I'll drop by," Max said.



A few friends turned out to be a swarm of people milling around the large social room like bees in a hive. There was a refreshment table that contained foods Max had never even heard of and a bar in the corner where two bartenders were kept busy. The senator was standing near the bar, drink in hand, talking to the governor of the state and the first lady. Max decided he could wait until that conversation was finished before he approached.

As a server with a tray of wineglasses passed, Max stopped him. "Can you tell me which is Mrs. Alton?"

The server pointed across the room to a woman dressed all in black: dress, stockings, shoes, and tiny hat on light brown shoulder-length hair pulled back and held with a silver clasp.

Max edged his way through the crowd to her. She was with two men who were speculating on which year Wynford would run for president. The woman gave him a slight smile when he joined the three of them, but when he introduced himself the smile turned to a frown.

"I wonder if I might speak with you," he asked her.

"Now? Here?" Her eyebrows went up as though he had asked her to fornicate in public.

"If you don't mind," he said. "I need some information which only you can give me."

She excused herself to the two men and headed for a corner of the room. "Well, what is it?"

"Tell me about finding Mrs. Wynford, from the time you went in the house."

"I've already told the police everything there is to tell. At least, everything I know."

"Sorry to make you repeat it, but I need to hear it straight from you."

"I told it straight to the police."

"Please, Mrs. Alton . . ." He wanted to say, I AM the police. He was beginning to take a dislike to the woman.

"Oh, all right! At one-fifteen when I had not heard from Selena, I tried to call and got no answer. I thought she might have overslept or was in the shower and didn't hear the phone, so I went over there and let myself in. Yes, the door was locked, as I told the police. I called several times, and then went upstairs. She was in bed, and I thought she was asleep, so I went to the bed—"

"How was she lying in bed?"

"On her right side, her back to me."

"Were the bedclothes tangled or in any way messed up?"

"No, sheet and spread were up to her waist. I touched her shoulder and shook it, and when she didn't respond, I turned her toward me. At first I thought she was unconscious, but then I real-

ized she was dead and called nine-one-one. I knew Riley was on the floor of the legislature and I couldn't reach him. I didn't notice the red marks on her neck until the medics came and said it looked like a strangling."

"What about the room itself?" Max asked. "Did you notice anything out of place, anything that would indicate a struggle of any kind?"

She shook her head. "No, not at all. Look, Captain, there's really nothing else I can tell you. Selena was my dearest, closest friend as well as my neighbor, and right now I'm feeling absolutely devastated. I simply can't talk about it any more." And she turned and walked away from him, headed for the bar.

Could she have done it? Could she have strangled Selena without getting scratched and bruised? Only if Selena had been drugged, and the M.E.'s report said there was no trace of drugs, not even a sleeping pill. Yet Max was having trouble buying into the "dearest, closest friend" business. Could Vera Alton have lent her key to someone else? Someone she paid to do the job? The more Max watched her watching Riley Wynford, the surer he became that McKay was right: Something was going on there, at least on Vera's part.

Max saw the governor pat Wynford on the shoulder and then he and the first lady moved to another group. Max made a beeline for the senator. He introduced himself and noticed that, like Vera Alton, Wynford frowned at the word "detective."

"I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this," Max apologized, "but I need to talk to you now."

"Whatever," Wynford mumbled.

Max noticed dark circles beneath the man's eyes, a haggard look on his face, as well as a look of exhaustion. He was obviously a man in the throes of deep grief.

"Senator, the report I read said Mrs. Wynford's house key was found in a pocketbook on top of a dresser," Max said. "Is it possible that someone could have had a copy made of her key?"

"No way. There've been several break-ins in our neighborhood in the past year, and both Selena and I have always been careful about house keys."

"Can you think of anyone, any reason why anyone would want to kill your wife?"

The senator looked down at the floor and when he looked up again he was misty-eyed. "No reason in the world. Selena is . . . was a kind, generous, wonderful woman. I don't know anyone who didn't like her. She had a world of friends."

"And what about you? As someone in politics, you must have made a few enemies."

"I don't have any enemies who would kill my wife," Wynford

said, looking annoyed now. "Any murderous enemies would kill *me*, not Selena. Anyway, I try to make a point of *not* making enemies, even in the other party."

The man was getting agitated; his mouth had a hard line and his face was reddening. "I suppose next you'll be asking me if I gave a copy of my key to some thug to come in and kill my wife."

Max looked him straight in the eye and said quietly, "And did you?"

"Jesus! I don't believe this! How can you possibly think . . . ? I *loved* my wife. What possible reason could I have for having her murdered?"

Max shook his head. McKay had checked into life insurance. There was a ten-thousand-dollar policy on Selena's life, and that amount to Riley Wynford was less than chicken feed. To run a national campaign would take millions of dollars, and even a statewide one now cost two or three million. Also, in an upwardly mobile political career, Selena could only have been an asset with her good looks. Max looked across the room at Vera Alton. For looks, she couldn't even come close to Selena. But who could know another's motives?

"Thank you, Senator. I won't take up any more of your time. Please know you have my condolences on your loss."

He left the Essex Club and went to his apartment, where he unpacked his bag, looked in the fridge for something to eat, and ended up with a pimiento cheese sandwich. Sitting at a table in the small kitchen, he mulled over what he knew so far.

One thing he had always counted on in his work was a "feeling" he got when he was on the right track. If something "felt" right, it usually was. On this case, the only feeling he had was one of frustration.

There was one angle that had not been checked, or if it had, it was not listed in the report McKay had given him. He picked up his cell and rang the station, asked for McKay, and drummed his fingers on the table impatiently while he waited. Finally, McKay answered.

"Where were you, in upper Slobovia?" Max always got a bit testy on a case that had no clues pointing in a specific direction.

"I was in the lab talking to Arabella to see if they could have missed anything."

"Not likely," Max said. "They're thorough. Listen, I want a complete financial report on Riley and Selena Wynford and on Vera Alton. ASAP."

"It's pretty late now, but I'll get it in the morning."

"First thing," Max said, and hung up.

He wasn't sure if that information would point anywhere, but right now anything was worth a try.

Riley looked around the large room at the clusters of people. To them it was a party, a political reception, not a time of remem-

brance, of mourning for a beautiful woman. Selena was the cause of the gathering, but the effect was something else entirely, and he couldn't take any more. Unobtrusively, he slipped out of the room and went to the elevator in the hall. In another few seconds he was in his room on the fifth floor with the door locked and a DO NOT DISTURB sign hung on the knob.

He was tired, so tired. He had never dreamed anything could be this wearying: the endless questions from the police, the arrangements, moving to the club, the funeral, the hullabaloo downstairs right now. He had had no time to mourn what people kept referring to as "your loss," as though proper etiquette demanded that Selena's name not be mentioned.

They had been married for fifteen years and she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had been a secretary in the large legal firm where he worked and she had had dozens of suitors. When she said yes to his proposal, he had been so excited he hadn't slept for three nights.

Now she was gone.

A knock at the door caused him to start. He went to the door, jerked it open, and pointed to the sign. "Can't you read?" he asked the hall porter.

"Sorry to disturb you, Senator, but a policeman just brought this mail over from your house. I thought you might want it. And he said they're taking the tape off tomorrow and you can go back home anytime you want after that."

Riley nodded to the porter, gave him a five-dollar bill to make up for his rudeness, and closed the door. He wasn't really sure he wanted to go back home. It made his skin crawl to think of sleeping in that bed again.

He looked down at the handful of mail. Mostly sympathy cards, a few bills and, as he went through it looking at the envelopes, one strange one with the address in block printing. He sat down in the one easy chair in the room and opened it, paling and his breath coming in gasps as he read:

Dear Senator,

You dint tell me you was a bigwig, a senator and all when you paid me five large to kill your wife. I thought you was some pore dumb schmo having a hard time or I would of ask you for more money. I done everything you tole me just like you tole me and now I want more money or I am going to write the police a letter and tell them everything. There is a recycle bin right behind the Silver Dollar Diner. Leeve a plain envelope with another five grand in it or the police will be hearing from me.

You know who.

Unbelievable! was his first thought as he finished reading. Then, on second reading, he began hyperventilating. "Oh my God!" he said. "Oh my God!"

Max slept in fits and starts that night. He'd sleep for a few minutes and then jerk awake, the Wynford case very much on his mind. He had sat up late reading the newspaper accounts of the murder and was not surprised to find the papers calling for a quick arrest of the murderer of the popular senator's wife. That such a thing could have happened in a quiet, upscale neighborhood was appalling, the press implied. And if the police didn't find the killer soon, there might be more heads rolling than there had been during the French Revolution.

The press obviously was going to lop off a few noggins without the benefit of a guillotine, Max thought. No wonder the chief was on edge.

He was up at seven o'clock and by eight was back at the Wynford house. The young officer on duty was in the process of taking down the yellow tape when Max drove up. "Morning, Captain. The chief said no point in leaving this up any longer."

"I suppose not," Max said. "But I want to look around one more time."

He was let in the front door and he went over the entire house, checking every door, every window. All were bolted shut, so there was absolutely no way anyone could have entered the house without a key or else breaking a window, at which point the alarm would have gone off. Of the people with keys, the senator was in the statehouse all day (Max had checked the sheet at the door; he'd signed in shortly after eight and out at six), and Mrs. Alton was not physically strong enough to have strangled Selena without a fierce struggle leaving both of them battered and bruised. If Mrs. Alton lent her key to the killer, what was the reason?

The most obvious was that if she was in love with Wynford and wanted to marry him, she couldn't as long as Selena was alive. Wynford obviously would not muddy his political image with a divorce right before running for national office.

Could Wynford have hired a killer? What would be his most pressing reason for wanting his wife gone? Max couldn't think of a reason strong enough to lead to murder. Selena's looks alone would be a political asset for him, and if she were half as charming as she looked . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by McKay, who bounced into the room as though he had been double-dribbled. "They said you'd probably be here," he said. "I've got it. At least as much as is available. They may have funds in foreign banks, and stocks that I'm unable to find certificates for, but here's what I've got." He handed

Max a long piece of yellow-lined paper.

Max studied it carefully. There were lists of checking accounts, savings accounts, certificates of deposit, money-market accounts, and stock certificates for both the senator and Mrs. Alton. For Selena, nothing was listed except a checking account containing \$632.45. The bottom line was that the senator had assets of just under two million dollars, but Mrs. Alton's totaled more than seven million. Max whistled.

"Where did her money come from? Her ex-husband?"

"No, her father owned some kind of mine in Colorado. It was sold at his death two years ago and Mrs. Alton and her brother divided the money. She also inherited some land and a building in downtown Denver. She gets rent on those."

"I guess she won't be selling pencils on the corner in the next depression," Max said, then laughed at the expression on McKay's face. To the younger man, the idea of selling pencils was as unimaginable as a depression.

Back at headquarters, the desk sergeant said, "Captain, the Senator is waiting in your office to see you."

The senator didn't look like death warmed over, Max thought as the man stood up, he looked like stone-cold death. He was pale as ashes except for deep purple lines under both eyes and a red mark on one cheek where he obviously had cut himself shaving.

Max gestured for him to sit down again and the senator dropped back into the chair in front of the desk as though unable to stand for another second.

"What can I do for you?" Max asked.

"I can't believe this," Wynford said, throwing a letter across the desk. "First my wife is murdered, and now I'm the victim of an extortionist."

Max looked at the envelope with the senator's name and address printed in block letters. Slowly he took out the single piece of paper, holding it by a tiny corner, and read it. He looked up at the pale, shaken man across from him, then read it again. "Who is You Know Who?" he asked.

"I haven't a clue," Wynford said. "Obviously someone is taking advantage of my situation in order to extort money from me. Unless you find the murderer in a hurry, I suppose I'm fair game for every crook who can read a newspaper or look at a TV newscast."

"The envelope's no good for prints, but what about the letter? Anyone handle it other than you . . . and the writer, of course?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'll send it to the lab," Max said. "Can you think of anyone who would have sent this kind of letter?"

"Certainly not!"

"The Silver Dollar Diner, are you familiar with it?"

"Yes, it's an old boxcar painted silver and it's on Oak Street. They have the best barbeque in town and people from the legislature eat there occasionally."

Max smiled. "Yes, I've been there a few times myself. Why do you suppose it was named as a repository for the money? And why is there no time or time limit for you to take the money?"

Wynford threw up his hands. "I haven't a clue about anything. All I know is that I want the murderer found and this nightmare to be over."

"We're doing everything we can," Max said, knowing that was slim comfort to the man.

The senator left and Max went straight to the lab with the letter.

"Something else you want yesterday?" Arabella asked, rubbing her hands on her green smock before taking the letter.

"Day before," he said. "I'll wait."

She took the letter into the next room and it seemed a long time before she was back. She didn't have the letter with her. "What?" Max asked before she could say anything.

"Something strange," she said. "Senator Wynford's prints are very clear, but the letter looks as though someone wiped across it with a handkerchief or towel. There are marks to indicate a rubbing and bits of lint on the letter. There is only one fingerprint and it's a smudge. But there's a possibility that if I work with it for a while, I can make something of it."

Max sighed. "Work with it."

When he went back to his office he was surprised to find Vera Alton sitting there, her legs crossed, her right foot swinging impatiently.

"Good morning, Mrs. Alton," he said, sitting on the corner of his desk.

"Have you got a suspect yet?" were her first words.

He almost smiled. "Possibly," he said. "Nothing definite yet."

"I want a police guard on my house," she said. "If someone is going in a *locked* house murdering people just for the fun of it, I want protection. I live alone, you know."

"The fun of it?"

"What else? Nothing was stolen."

"You'll have to talk to the chief about a police guard," Max told her, "but I think he'll say that we can't spare the manpower right now, and he'll promise you that a patrolman will drive by your house at frequent intervals."

"Not good enough. Look, I'm scared, Captain. And I think with all the taxes I pay, I'm entitled to a little protection."

She really did look scared . . . or else she was a very good actress who was trying to throw suspicion off herself.

"We'll do the best we can, Mrs. Alton." He stood up.

As soon as she was out of the office, he called McKay. "Put a tail on Vera Alton. I want to know everywhere she goes, whom she sees, especially if she sees Wynford, and if the tail can get close enough without being obvious, what she says to Wynford if she sees him."

Then he went to the Silver Dollar Diner and ordered a barbeque sandwich with slaw. He hadn't been in the diner for several years, but not much had changed. The tubelike eatery still had a long counter the length of the building, and a dozen booths, six on each side of the door. There was a man behind the counter—a swarthy man who needed a shave—and a waitress who served the booths. She was middle-aged, wore too much makeup, and had a loud voice as she called in orders.

Through the window he looked for a recycling bin, but didn't see one. Finishing the sandwich, he said to the man behind the counter, "Good sandwich. My compliments to the chef."

The man grunted. "I'll tell him."

"I'd like to tell him myself."

"He's too busy to come out now."

"Then I'll go to him," Max said, and before he could be stopped, he went behind the counter and pushed open the swinging door. The cook, a portly, balding man with a gray moustache, looked up from the stove, surprised.

"Good sandwich," Max said. "My compliments."

The man looked at Max as though he had scattered his marbles all over the floor, then said, "Yeah, thanks."

There was a window in the kitchen that looked out over the back of the tiny lot, and there was a green recycling bin about a dozen feet from the window.

"Hard to find a really good barbeque sandwich anymore," Max said, stalling.

"Yeah," the cook grunted and continued flipping burgers over the grill.

It still bothered Max as he left the diner why the person who wrote the letter had not given a time limit for the delivery of the money, and now he wondered why a spot so close to the diner was chosen. The cook could see—

Yes, indeed, the cook would see! That was it.

Max rushed back to headquarters and went directly to the lab. "Got anything yet on that smudged print, Arabella?"

She handed him the letter, holding it by a corner with tweezers. "Sure do, Cap. The print belongs to Clifford Parley. I checked him on the computer and he's in prison right now for robbing a liquor store in Bryson."

"Oh." It was a disappointment and it looked as though Wynford had been right: It was merely someone trying to extort money. In this case, a prisoner. But if he was in prison, how could he expect

to get money he asked for out of the bin behind the Silver Dollar? Unless the cook was in it with him.

In his office, Max pulled up Parley's record on his own computer. He was serving his second sentence, the first having been for breaking and entering, for which he'd served eighteen months; now, for the armed robbery, he had been sentenced to ten years. So far, there had been no infractions in prison, so he would get out early on "good time." It was the end of the report that caused Max to blink and sit back in his chair.

Parley got out every day on work release. He was a cook at the Silver Dollar.

"Something you ought to know," McKay said, coming into the office without ceremony or greeting. "Conway, the tail on Alton, just called in and said she'd been in a real-estate office putting her house on the market."

"She planning to move in with Wynford?" Max asked calmly.

"Not even close," McKay said. "Conway followed her into the office and heard her telling the agent she was going to move back to Denver, which is where she came from originally. Said she had interests there."

"Then she must not have as much interest here as we thought," Max said. "If Wynford plans to run for U.S. Senate from this state, it's for sure he can't be living in Colorado."

"So are we back to square one?"

Max made a pyramid of his hands, looked again at the computer screen, then at McKay. "No, I think we're halfway home. Tell Conway to forget Mrs. Alton and start tailing the senator. I particularly want to know everybody he sees now."

Max went to the window and looked out over Morris Square, a small city park. He was being nudged by that "feeling," not a piercing jab, but just the tiniest prod. He turned and faced McKay. "Go down to the Silver Dollar Diner and arrest one of the cooks, Clifford Parley, for attempted extortion. That's for starters. Before the day is out we may be able to stick a murder rap on him."

In the late afternoon, Brad Conway called in and said he had been outside Senator Wynford's office for hours. He listed the people who had gone in: a few politicians and Mrs. Alton.

"There was some kind of altercation with Mrs. Alton, and voices were raised. I heard the senator say, 'But I depended on you to help me finance my campaign,' and she said, 'You know I don't gamble, Riley. I never bet except on a sure thing, and a political campaign is nowhere near a sure thing. Remember the last national election? Besides, I'm moving back to Denver as soon as

my house is sold.' And the senator said something else I couldn't hear, but it sounded like swearing."

"Good work," Max said. "You can come on in now."

Then he went up to the top floor of the building where the jail was, taking Parley's letter with him. Let into the holding cell where Parley was slumped on a bench hooked to the cinder-block wall, Max held up the letter. "The charge has changed from attempted extortion to murder. I know you've been Mirandized, but just to make sure, you have the right—"

Parley, turning the color of the wall, yelled "Where'd you get that?"

"From Senator Wynford. And it has your fingerprint on it."

Parley looked as though he either would faint or go into hysterics. "I don't know nothing about that murder. I swear to God I didn't do it."

"You admit it in the letter."

"I just thought I saw a way to make some money. I didn't do it, I didn't do it. I've never even seen the senator's house. I just wanted to get some money. I never thought he'd turn the letter over to the cops."

Max took a deep breath. Was it possible the man was telling the truth? Had he been reading about the murder in the papers and decided it would be an easy scam? If that was so, then he, Max, really was back at square one.

Back in his office, Max called McKay. "Go down to the Silver Dollar and question the waitress and the man behind the counter. See if Parley left the diner at all on Monday morning."

Within half an hour, he had a call from McKay. "Parley was in on Monday at the usual time, seven o'clock, and he never left until four P.M."

So that was that.

It had been beginning to feel right when the finger of guilt pointed to the senator, though Max couldn't imagine even one reason why he would want to kill his wife. Could it possibly have been some outsider? If so, how did he get in, and why was nothing in the entire house disturbed or stolen?

The charge against Parley would remain attempted extortion. There was no murder charge to be lodged anywhere against anyone.

It was another night that Max couldn't sleep. Finally, he gave up trying and sat at the kitchen table drinking decaf coffee, pretending it was a narcotic that would lull him to drowsiness.

Where to go now? Had he really reached a complete dead end in the investigation? The only thing he knew to do was to start at the

beginning, thoroughly go through everything that had happened on the morning of the murder.

He had all but eliminated Vera Alton. Her only possible reason for wanting Selena dead would be so she herself could have the senator, and if that were the case, she certainly would have been willing to lend Wynford money to finance a dozen campaigns. And she would not be moving back to Denver. And Max seriously doubted the woman could have located a hit man willing to kill Selena. The average society woman, which Alton appeared to be, didn't know about such things.

Wynford? He had checked into the statehouse a little after eight and out at six. It was extremely doubtful that he would have paid a killer, being afraid the man might do exactly what Parley had done. A political career is easily ruined.

And yet, Max still felt that nudge.

At six o'clock the next morning, he was standing beside the sign-in table at the statehouse, showing his shield to the guard.

"I want to look at the book for last Monday," he said.

Looking perplexed, the guard found Monday's page in the book and handed it to Max, who scanned it to see if there were any smudges, anything at all unusual, and sign-ins all the way down the page. Everything looked okay, perfectly legit.

As Max gave the book back, a cleaning crew appeared in the rotunda. They had come up in the elevator.

"What's below this floor?" he asked the guard.

"Just the basement. Bunch of stuff stored down there."

"I think I'll take a look." He took the elevator down and looked around a huge room where indeed a "bunch of stuff" was stored. File cabinets, chairs, a desk or two, a huge picture of George Washington, as well as portraits of former governors, two of whom had served during what some still laughably called the War of Northern Aggression.

Between two file cabinets, almost hidden, was a door. Max opened it and looked into a dark tunnel. Just outside the door was a light switch, which he turned on. The tunnel was fairly long, a hundred feet or so, and ended in another door.

He went through to the door and opened it, finding himself behind the statehouse in a reserved parking lot. There was a space at the back of the lot marked with Senator Riley Wynford's name.

Riley was in the social room of the Essex Club reading the morning newspaper. This would be his only chance, because he had appointments all day, some left over from yesterday because he'd been too upset to see them. After Vera's visit, he couldn't get his mind on anything else. He had counted heavily on her support to

get him to Washington—and possibly keep him there for a long time. Had he misread the signs? Over the past year he had been sure that she had the hots for him. Apparently not. Maybe her friendship with Selena had been real and not just an excuse to see more of him.

He almost jumped out of the big leather chair when a voice beside him said, "Senator Wynford, would you stand up, please?" There was a blue uniform on either side of the chair.

"What is it?" he asked, irritated, but he stood up anyway.

Almost before he realized what was happening, his hands were pulled behind him and cuffed. "What the . . .?"

"Riley Wynford, you are under arrest for the murder of your wife. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

Max was waiting back at headquarters along with McKay and Chief Grayson. He was trying not to let the others see that he was in something close to a high state of nervousness. Although he was sure Wynford was guilty, he didn't have one shred of actual proof. Before giving the order to have Wynford brought in, he had asked himself, "Should I bet my job on this?"

That was exactly what he was doing.

Wynford was brought straight to the chief's office. His face was as scarlet as if he suffered from third-degree sunburn, and his mouth was a hard line across his face until he opened it and said, "Just what in hell do you think you're doing? I'm going to sue this whole department out of existence. You've ruined my—"

"Hold it, Wynford." Max held up his hand. "We know you murdered your wife and we know how you did it."

"You're insane! I was in the statehouse all day and the sign-in records prove it."

McKay looked puzzled and the chief looked as though at any second he would go into apoplexy. "Tell him how we know," he said, obviously about to erupt with curiosity to know himself.

"You signed in Monday morning," Max began, trying to say with authority what he believed to be the case, "and you went to your office in the building. Then, a few minutes later, you took the elevator down to the basement, went through the tunnel there to the parking lot, went home, and murdered your wife. Then you went back to the statehouse, back through the tunnel, and up to your office again. You were back at your desk shortly after nine o'clock."

Wynford was silent for a minute or two as he glared at the three faces staring at him. Then he said, "You can't prove that."

Max smiled. "Fingerprints, sir. You left fingerprints on the knobs of the door in the basement and the door that goes out to the lot." He wasn't sure about that, but he had the lab crew checking right now. If he was wrong . . .

Wynford let out a huge sigh and bowed his head. He looked up once as though going to speak, then looked down again.

"I have one question," Max said. "Why did you do it?"

"Because . . ." Wynford said, and that one word was as good as a confession. "Because Selena said if I ran for office again she would divorce me. She hated and despised politics at any level and she wanted no part of it. A divorce would be a strike against me right now no matter what office I ran for."

"And you loved power more than you loved your wife," Max said. "My second question is: Why was there no struggle when you strangled her?"

"She was asleep. I cut off her air before she was entirely awake. She did struggle some, but afterward I straightened the bed and placed her in a sleeping position again."

"Why didn't you make it look like a robbery?" McKay asked.

There was a long pause, then, "I didn't think about it. I was in a hurry to get back to the statehouse. I was thinking only about the sympathy I would get, my wife murdered and all."

The chief spoke for the first time, obviously determined not to have any infraction against *his* department. "You'll be wanting a lawyer immediately, won't you, Mr. Wynford?"

"I *am* a lawyer," Wynford said, "and I just lost my most important case."

As Wynford was taken away to be fingerprinted, a mug shot made, and introduced to his new residential arrangement, Max went to the lab to see what they had.

"Hey, Cap," Arabella greeted him, "those doors were lousy with prints." She paused, undoubtedly enjoying Max's crestfallen look. "But I'm sure we found what you want. I'm checking them out on the computer now."

It was late afternoon before Max left the office. He had hardly arrived home when he had a call from the chief.

"The capture of the killer will be the biggest thing in the morning paper," Grayson said. "A real scoop, so all the media will be in a state of ecstasy." He laughed gleefully. "What a shock it will be for the public to learn that Golden Boy is a bit tarnished."

"Yes, I suppose so," Max said.

"Great work, Max. I knew you could do it. We'll have a little celebration tomorrow."

"I'm leaving early in the morning."

"Leaving?"

"Going back to Hatteras. I still have a couple of days left for fishing, poker, and . . . No, scrub that. I'm going to Tierra del Fuego." ●

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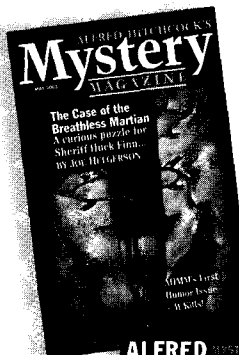


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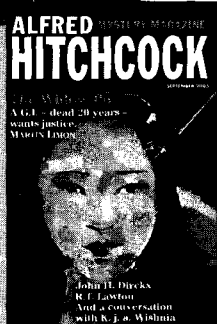
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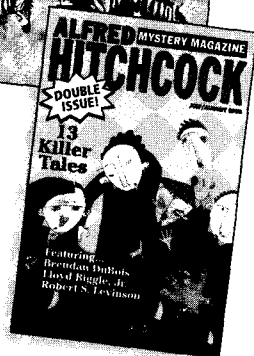
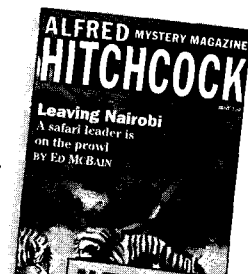
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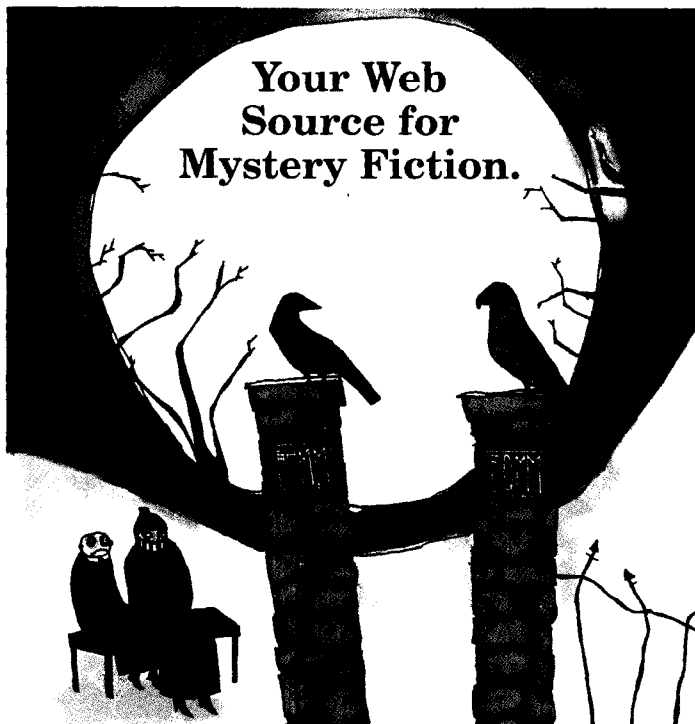
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